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No. 7

DEATH-NOTCH, THE DESTROYER.



DEATH-NOTCH
SCALP HUNTER
THE YOUNG
BY OLL COOMES

"BEHOLD HIM!" CRIED THE SUPPOSED WARRIOR, THROWING ASIDE HIS BLANKET.
"I AM DEATH-NOTCH!"—Page 4.

Death-Notch, THE DESTROYER

OR,

The Spirit Lake Avengers.

BY OLL COOMES.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEAGUE OF EIGHT.

"AMOS MEREDITH?"

"Here."

"Richard Carter?"

"Here."

"David Hawes?"

"Here."

"Phelix O'Ray?"

"Here, bedad!"

"Frank Harriott?"

"Here."

"George Olsen?"

"Here."

"Omaha, the Friendly?"

"Here."

"All are present," said the leader of the party, Fred Travis.

In fact it was unnecessary to call the roll to apprise that little band that not one of its members was absent. But it was done in observance of a code of regulations which they had adopted before setting out upon the trail.

All were young men, none being over three-and-twenty years of age, and two or three somewhat younger, but all, like true sons of the border, were possessed of hardihood and strength, and their hearts were burning with a terrible fire of revenge.

Each one carried a rifle, a side tomahawk and hunting-knife, while from the bosom of their hunting-shirts peeped the polished pistol-butts.

They stood beneath the umbrageous covering of an oak, each leaning upon his rifle, and waiting the orders of his leader; but, ere those orders breaking up their night's bivouac beneath the great oak tree, there suddenly came the sharp report of a rifle, followed by a low cry—the unmistakable death-wail.

The Eight Avengers gazed from one to the other with inquiring glances.

"Without a doubt another accursed red-skin has fallen," said Fred Travis.

"Yes; but who fired the shot?" asked young Hawes. "Does the Omaha know?"

"Does not Death-Notch, the Young Scalp-Hunter, lurk within these woods?"

The Avengers started at mention of this name of one whom none of them but the young Omaha had never seen, yet of whom they had heard most amazing reports. He was represented as being a youth of Titan proportions and power, cunning as a fox and subtle as a serpent—a deadly enemy to the human race, going and coming like one of supernatural powers and bearing the heart of a fiend. Human lives and human scalps were said to be the sole object of his search; and that upon a thousand different trees in the forest bordering the Little Sioux river, might be found the totem of this mad destroyer—a notch cut with a tomahawk upon the trunk or limb of a tree, each notch representing a victim; and where the notch was found there could be found also a decaying corpse or bleaching skeleton.

No wonder then that the Eight Avengers started when the Friendly mentioned the name of Death-Notch.

"Friend or foe," replied Travis, firmly, "we must do our work. Were Death-Notch twice the destroyer that he is, he must not stand in the way of our vengeance; nor shall he. Omaha, the duty devolves upon you to ascertain what that shot meant."

The Omaha at once glided from their midst as silently as a shadow, while the band in perfect stillness awaited his return. A few moments passed when a low whistle was heard.

"That is the Omaha's call," said Travis; "advance!"

The little band moved away to the woods, and soon came to where the Indian was standing within the shadows of a wide-branching tree.

"What discovery, Omaha?" asked Travis.

The young Indian pointed at the ground. There, half concealed among the weeds and grass, lay the form of a Sioux warrior, dead and scalped. From a deep gash in the left cheek the warm blood was still flowing.

"Death-Notch has been here!" simply said the Friendly. "Behold his totem!"

Every eye was turned in the direction indicated, and upon the trunk of the tree near where the dead warrior lay, they saw a small notch, evidently cut with a hatchet, and so recently that the sap was still oozing from the wound.

The band stood for a moment silently before the dead warrior and the dread signet.

"Where is he?" at length demanded Travis.

"Ask the winds," was the Omaha's reply;

"Death-Notch leaves no trail."

Not caring to fan the superstitious fears

which it was apparent some of the band felt, Travis exclaimed:

"Well, trail or no trail, we must on to our work. So forward all!"

In single file the little band set off through the forest.

History has recorded the horrors of the Spirit Lake Massacre, in the spring of 1857. A detachment of braves of the great chief, Inkpaducha's force, under Young Sleepy Eyes, descended upon the settlements in the vicinity of the lakes, killing and burning all before them.

At the time of the attack these young men were away several miles southward, hunting, but when they returned they found their homes destroyed and their friends all gone. Then they formed a compact which afterward rendered their names noted; they swore to track the merciless foe to death, and rescue their friends, if any still existed.

For days had they traversed the treeless prairie and trackless wilderness, guided by the never-failing and indomitable Omaha. And now, as they moved on, and the sun mounted higher into the heavens, the air became hot and sultry and the sky overcast with clouds. To the Avengers these were forebodings of a storm, still they pressed on, and when the sun stood upon the meridian, they stopped by a little stream to rest and refresh themselves from their meager supply of food.

While thus engaged the sharp clatter of hoofs broke suddenly upon their ears. The next instant a youthful horseman came galloping from the shadows of the woods and swept like a dart across the little valley before them.

The horseman was a mere boy. He could not have been over sixteen, and was as fair and delicate in features as a maiden. Masses of long dark hair fell in ripples to his horse's back, and dark, lustrous eyes looked sharply from between their long silken lashes. A little red cap with a single white feather surmounted his head. A blue jacket handsomely wrought with threads of gold clothed the beautiful rounded shoulders, slender form and well molded arms. The collar lay open, revealing a full, snow-white chest and throat.

The only weapon he possessed was a small, silver-mounted rifle, which he carried in front of him across the withers of the raven-black pony he bestrode.

The youth, seemingly, did not see our young friends, but galloped across the valley and plunged into the woods beyond.

"Och, but he's a royal lad," exclaimed young O'Ray. "Sich a form; sich hair; sich eyes, ay! be the Howly Mother, he must be a young god ave the woods."

"He was a fine-looking youth," said Amos Meredith.

"A young ranger, I suppose," added another.

"Boys," said Fred Travis, "say what you may of that youth, I would venture my life, almost, on the cast that it is a female."

"Then," said Omaha, starting suddenly up, "if that is the case, Death-Notch is a female, for you have looked upon the face of that terrible young Scalp-Hunter!"

CHAPTER II.

THE LOVERS.

A SCORE of log-cabins surmounting a bold stony bluff, overlooking the Little Sioux river, comprised the settlement of Stony Cliff. It had first been established as a small trading-post by a party of French Canadians, and from year to year a family or two had been added to its population until it now numbered something like a hundred souls. Men had brought their families there and established themselves permanently, engaging principally in hunting and the fur trade. A few, however, followed the immoral calling of whisky-traders. Another kept a gun-shop and variety-store, and a few tilled a number of acres of ground near the settlement.

Although Stony Cliff bore a disreputable name, as most all these frontier posts generally do, it was not entirely wanting in morals. It had passed laws of its own, established a school and church, and strenuous efforts were made to bring all within the pale of Christianity. But in this it had failed in many instances, as the progress of our story will show.

At noon on the same day that our story opens, a young girl stood alone upon the banks of the river, within the shadow of a clump of trees, less than half a league below the settlement.

She was not over seventeen years of age, tall, queenly and graceful in proportion, and fair and lovely in every feature. Before her upon the river a little canoe was rocking upon the waves, and in it lay the maiden's hat and shawl.

As she walked to and fro beneath the arching boughs of the trees, she would start occasionally and glance anxiously about her, but, nothing meeting her gaze, a cloud of disappointment would settle upon her pretty face, and she would half-nervously and half-angrily twist and twirl the bouquet of wild flowers she held in her hand.

Was she there to meet some one? Was she expecting an unfaithful lover?

As the moments wore on, the sound of a foot-

step broke suddenly upon her ears, and then the figure of a youth appeared from the shadows of the woods and stood before her.

He was a handsome lad, of not over eighteen or nineteen years, and, in spite of his youth, was possessed of all the developments of a man. Indeed, such perfection of manhood was seldom found in a boy. He was of medium height, with massive chest, muscular limbs, dark eyes that sparkled with the light of a wild, daring spirit, clear-cut features and a well-defined head, covered with a wealth of short, crispy curls.

He was dressed in a clean, neat-fitting garb of a hunter, and carried a rifle and hunting-knife.

The maiden did not start with surprise at sight of him. On the contrary, her face lit up with a light of love, and, advancing toward him, she said, in a petulant tone:

"Oh, Ralph! why have you kept me waiting so long?"

"I was not aware that I had, sweet Sylveen," he replied, in a low, pleasant voice, stooping and kissing her upon the warm, flushed cheek.

"Why, yes, Ralph; I have been here for more than an hour," Sylveen responded.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, my love; but then if you will look at that shadow, Sylveen, you will see I am here at the appointed hour."

Sylveen Gray glanced at the shadow, and laughed softly.

"Oh, I know, Ralph; you are always true to me," she said; "but I am so impatient."

"You must try and grow out of that, Sylveen."

"I have tried, Ralph; but anxiety for your safety keeps me in a fever of excitement all the time."

"Do not, I implore you, dear Sylveen, keep yourself uneasy about me. It is my solace—the guiding hope of my future happiness, to know that you love me—that you are my own darling Sylveen. But, I would be still more happy did I know you were not fretting about my safety. Rest assured that I will not be so reckless of your happiness as to thrust my head incautiously into needless dangers."

"But, Ralph, you know," Sylveen gently persisted, "that Death-Notch, the Scalp-Hunter, is in these woods, and that he favors none in his terrible vengeance."

Ralph St. Leger smiled at the maiden's remarks, and replied:

"I have never yet seen Death-Notch, Sylveen, nor have I ever met a person that has seen him. Is he not a myth?"

"No, Ralph; several of the settlers have seen him at a distance," said Sylveen. "They said his face was that of a mere boy, but that he was a giant in stature."

Again Ralph St. Leger smiled. He was a youth whose education and natural good sense overbalanced all superstitious belief and reports, despite the fact that he was a borderman himself, a trapper-boy and free rover of the prairie.

"Well, dear, I may confess that there is such a person as he whom they call Death-Notch. I have seen his totem—the death-notch—upon a tree where lay a lifeless savage. But, I have reason to believe that Death-Notch is the white man's friend."

"I wish I could only think so myself, Ralph, for just yesterday one of our settlers was found dead near the village. There was a deep wound on his left cheek, and a fresh notch cut on a little sapling near where the body lay. Death-Notch had slain him."

"What was the settler's name?" asked Ralph.

"El Pardou."

"A French Canadian?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps Death-Notch may have held some grudge against him?"

"I cannot say, as to that," replied Sylveen, "but I do know he keeps Stony Cliff in a perpetual state of excitement."

"Not any more so, I suppose, than I understand he keeps the Indians," said St. Leger.

"Perhaps not; but Ralph, will you not consent to take up your head-quarters at the settlement?"

"Sylveen, I can not. I love the wild woods and its excitements, and I ask nothing more besides than an occasional interview with my darling Sylveen."

"That you shall ever have, dear Ralph, unless my uncle forbids me leaving the settlement."

"Has he threatened to do so, Sylveen?"

"No; but he knows I meet you, and of late he has intimated to me that he had chosen from his acquaintance a young man who he thought would make me a good husband."

Ralph's brow darkened.

"Did he mention his name?" he asked.

"Yes; it was Scott Shirely."

"Well, Sylveen, he is a handsome, dashing young cavalier, yet I have no fears of him winning you from me."

"No, never, dear Ralph, and—"

She did not complete the sentence, for, at this juncture, the dip of an oar arrested their attention.

Out upon the river they saw a canoe coming down from the settlement. In it were seated two men, one of whom was Sylveen Gray's uncle and guardian, Abel Hatch, and the other Scott Shirely.

Sylveen started violently at sight of them, and turning to her lover, said:

"I will have to leave you, dear Ralph. You know uncle Abel does not like you, and this meeting I desire to remain unknown to him."

"Yes, go, dear Sylveen. In two days I will be here at noon again. Good-by."

He stooped and kissed her, then turned and glided away into the deep shadows of the wood, while Sylveen entered her canoe, and started on her return to the village.

For several minutes Ralph St. Leger pursued his way onward through the woods, keeping within the deepest shadows. Finally he came to a little thicket of undergrowth, in the center of which stood a low, scrubby oak.

Pausing, he gazed carefully around him, then parting the shrubbery he entered the thicket, and was lost from view.

A few moments later, a powerful Indian warrior, with tomahawk in hand, crept from an adjacent clump of bushes, and half crouching, stole into the thicket directly on the trail of St. Leger. There was death in the basilisk eyes of the savage, and, as the moments wore on, a low, half-suppressed wail suddenly issued from the depths of the thicket. Then followed an ominous silence, which was finally broken by the sound of footsteps retreating from the undergrowth. And still, a few minutes later, another figure emerged from the woods beyond, paused and gazed with starting eyes upon the thicket. It was the figure of an Indian, but his face wore no paint, nor evil, cunning expression. It was Omaha, the scout and guide of the Young Avengers!

For several moments he stood and gazed upon and over the thicket; then he placed his fingers to his lips, and produced a succession of peculiar sounds, and forth from the woods issued seven forms. They were those of our friends, the Young Avengers.

"What discovery, Omaha?" asked young Travis.

"A white youth entered the thicket. A powerful Sioux warrior followed him. A death-wail; retreating footsteps, and then silence. Death is in yon bushes. Come."

The Friendly led the way into the thicket, followed by his white companions.

Under the drooping boughs of the oak they came to a halt.

"There!" exclaimed the Friendly.

All eyes were at once turned in the direction indicated, and saw, lying upon the earth among the deepest shadows, the lifeless form of a Sioux warrior. He was scalpless. Across the left cheek was a deep wound, from which the blood was still pouring in a hot current.

"Death-Notch has been here," said Omaha, and he pointed to a fresh notch cut on a low bough directly over the fallen warrior.

CHAPTER III.

THE DESERTED HUT.

It was sunset. Ominous clouds were piled up against the western sky like the dark line of a giant mountain. Electric flashes shot along the craggy edges of the somber clouds, followed by the dull, sullen rumble of thunder. The wind was rising and raving in fitful gusts through the forest, shrieking like a demon over the hills and through the valleys.

A fearful storm was brewing, yet on through the dark aisles of the forest pressed the little band of Avengers, guided by the indomitable Omaha. The bellowing thunder, the vivid lightning, the howling wind and roaring trees, to them was but the spirit of adventure. As they continued on, however, the darkness became so intense that their red guide was compelled to resort to the moss on the trees in order to keep his course.

"This is getting to be tedious traveling, Omaha," said Fred Travis. "How far is it to the deserted cabin of which you spoke?"

"Not far," was the laconic reply.

The party pressed on in silence for nearly an hour after nightfall, when they came to the edge of a little glade. In the center of this opening, a prolonged flash of lightning showed them a log cabin, standing solitary and alone.

It was almost hidden from view by tall, rank weeds that grew to the very threshold, and which was evidence of itself that the building had not been inhabited by any one for years, save by bats and owls. Wild ivy clambered over the outer walls and over the roof, excluding the sunshine, thereby making it damp and moldy within. It was a desolated, deserted ruin, whose history was unknown to our party. Only Omaha knew, before that night, that such a cabin existed. In his wanderings abroad from the settlement, over two years before, he had run across it.

Omaha led the way across the yard to the cabin in the great wilderness. The door stood ajar, and was swaying to and fro on its heavy wooden hinges, that creaked and groaned in an ominous and ghostlike manner.

After making a careful reconnoissance around

the place to see that no enemy had preceded them to the inviting shelter, Omaha entered the cabin, followed by his friends. Their footsteps sounded dead on the damp puncheon floor, and their voices echoed hollow and sepulchral through the room.

By means in their possession a fire was hastily struck. Its light revealed a yawning fire-place in one end of the building, and in a very few minutes a roaring fire was burning upon the hearth, its cheerful heat dispelling much of the gloom from the place.

The Young Avengers were now enabled to obtain a fair view of the interior of their retreat. The cabin was of goodly dimensions, strongly built of heavy logs. There was a loft in it made of heavy slabs or puncheons, as was also the floor. The building was divided into two compartments by straight-edged slabs set upright across the center of the house. There was an opening in the center of this partition that was used as a door, but was unclosed.

There was a rude table and some rickety stools in the room, and around the walls were numerous gun-racks, which gave evidence of the place having once been the house of a party of hunters.

The outer door was closed and securely bolted. Then the little party gathered around the great stone hearth, to eat their supper and talk over their morrow's work.

At length the whole party relaxed into silence and listened to the howling storm without. It was truly appalling. Only the Omaha was on the alert.

In the heavy, ponderous door there was a wicket which opened and closed with a strong slide set in grooves. This the young Indian used as a look-out, and there was scarcely an interval of ten minutes but a careful survey was made of the yard in front of the cabin, the broad glare of the lightning enabling him to command a fair view of the glade.

The moments wore on, and finally every voice within the cabin became silent. This lasted several minutes, when all of a sudden Omaha sprung to his feet and advancing to the door, opened the wicket and gazed out.

The Young Avengers were startled by this sudden movement. They knew that Omaha's sense of hearing was never at fault, and from his actions they believed he had detected the presence of something not altogether right.

For a moment the Friendly stood with his face pressed close to the wicket, then he withdrew, closed the opening, and turning, walked slowly and calmly back to the fire.

"I have something to tell you, friends," he said.

"What is it? Has the storm blown over?"

"No; Death-Notch, the Young Scalp-Hunter, is at the door!"

CHAPTER IV.

STARTLING INFORMATION.

AFTER her interview with Ralph St. Leger, Sylveen Gray entered her canoe and started on her return to the village.

She was at once discovered by her uncle, Abel Hatch and Scott Shirely, who were coming down the river, and who at once headed their canoe directly toward her. In a few moments they were alongside of her canoe.

Abel Hatch was a stern-looking man of some fifty years of age, with features and eyes that were not altogether pleasant in their expression. His companion, Scott Shirely, was a young man of some five-and-twenty, tall and handsome, and possessed of a form and air that reminded one of a young and dashing cavalier of the Middle Ages.

His eyes were coal-black, as were also his long wavy hair and heavy mustache. He was dressed in a kind of flashy uniform, cavalry boots, and a broad-brimmed hat from which a red plume hung down over his shoulder.

He was by occupation, representing, as agent, the Hudson Bay Fur Company. He made his headquarters at Stony Cliff. Here he had been engaged for over a year, and had made the fur trade a lucrative one for the hunters and trappers that comprised the majority of the population of Stony Cliff. He also employed a number of sub-agents who traded with the Indians and hunters at a distance from the village. These agents were mostly French Canadians, and a rough set of men.

"Where now has my truant little ward been?" asked Abel Hatch, as they ran alongside of Sylveen's canoe.

Sylveen blushed scarlet, and before she could reply, or recover from her embarrassment, Scott Shirely said:

"Mr. Hatch, if you are going on down the river to your bear-traps, I believe I will return with Sylveen if she has no objections."

Before Sylveen could utter a protest against his intention, in case she had any desire to do so at all, the young fur-trader arose to his feet and stepped lightly into her canoe.

Then Abel Hatch drove his craft on down the river, and Sylveen and Shirely were alone.

"Sylveen, let me use the paddle," said the young fur-agent, seating himself before the maiden.

Sylveen yielded reluctantly to his request, for

she would much rather have been alone with her own thoughts than in the company of Scott Shirely.

"I hope, Sylveen," he said, apologetically, "that my company will not be distasteful to you."

"Oh, no, not at all, Mr. Shirely," replied Sylveen, with a slight tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

"I am quite fortunate, then, in dropping into your company, Miss Gray. Times are very, very dull at Stony Cliff just now. If it was not for the little excitement kept up in consequence of Death-Notch's doings, and by the freebooters under the notorious Pirate Paul, I'm thinking the Cliff would become as dreary as a rainy day."

"Have you heard any new reports about Death-Notch to-day?" asked Sylveen.

"Nothing since poor El Pardou's death."

"And what of Pirate Paul?"

"He is said to be about," said Shirely, and he fixed his eyes on Sylveen's with a strange light shining from their depths.

Sylveen, however, did not notice the expression.

"Who has seen him?" she finally asked.

"I have," replied Shirely.

"You? Is it possible? When did you see him, Mr. Shirely?"

"To-day."

Sylveen uttered a little cry of fear.

"But, Sylveen, why is it that your lover," continued Shirely, "does not visit you at your home?"

Sylveen started as though a serpent had hissed in her ear. Her face grew deathly pale, her dark-blue eyes flashed with indignation, and her lip curled with scorn and disdain.

"What do you know, Scott Shirely, of my lover? Have you been eavesdropping like a—?"

"Nay, nay, Sylveen," the young agent replied, in a regretful tone; "but there is one whose duty it has been to keep on the alert. It is not generally known, Sylveen, that you have been meeting Ralph St. Leger in secret interviews; but why, Sylveen, does he not come to see you at Stony Cliff?"

"He has his own reasons for not doing so," replied Sylveen, disdainfully.

"Yes, indeed, he has, Sylveen. He knows it would not be well for him to be caught in the village, for there are those there who would recognize him as Pirate Paul, chief of the prairie robbers."

"What?" Sylveen almost shrieked; "Ralph St. Leger, Pirate Paul?"

"This even so, Sylveen," replied Shirely; but the maiden was too much absorbed in her emotions to notice the latent meaning in his tone.

"Oh, my God!" she fairly moaned; "surely you are jesting, Mr. Shirely."

"I am not, Sylveen. I would not trifle with the feelings of one so pure and honest-hearted as you. But time will convince you that I speak the truth; and when your love for Ralph St. Leger has turned to hatred, then will I hope myself to gain that love which the young prairie freebooter has dared to gain."

"Mr. Shirely, I am ever so much obliged to you for this information if it is true; but not until I know positively that such is the case, will I believe that one so manly and open-hearted as Ralph St. Leger appears to be, could be guilty of such a crime."

"The proof shall be given, in due time," replied the young fur-agent; "for over a month there has been a spy on his track, consequently I know whereof I speak. But, Sylveen, let us talk of something more pleasant. Have you made the acquaintance of the new family lately come to Stony Cliff?"

"You allude to the Gregory family, do you not?" asked the maiden, though her thoughts seemed to be far away.

"Yes," replied Shirely.

"I called yesterday to see them. They appear to be fine people."

"There is a young woman in the family, is there not?"

"Yes; Miss Martha Gregory. But her health is very poorly and she is unable to be out of her room half the time. She seemed greatly shocked by the news of El Pardou's death at the hands of Death-Notch."

"She did?" questioned Shirely, and there was a little strangeness in his tone.

"Yes," replied Sylveen. "I suppose she is somewhat nervous and unused to these horrors of frontier life."

By this time they had reached a point where the bluffs rose up on each side of the river, in places to the height of a hundred feet. At different points the cliffs were shelving and their faces covered with creepers and parasitical plants and variegated colors that trailed in rich festoonery to the water's edge.

The young trader drove the canoe on up the river until he came to where the bluffs were less precipitous, and where a rude stairway had been chipped in the rock from the water's edge to the summit of the escarpment.

At the foot of these steps he permitted the prow of the canoe to touch. Then he leaped out and assisted Sylveen ashore.

Together they ascended the rude stairway to

the top of the bluff and there found themselves within the outskirts of Stony Cliff.

The cabins were scattered over several acres of the bluffs, the forest forming the eastern and southern boundaries, and being located in a bold curve of the river, it formed the other two limits of the settlement.

Sylveen went home, and after she had thought and cried over what Scott Shirely had told her of her lover, she composed herself and went over to see her new neighbors, the Gregorys.

She found Miss Martha Gregory an agreeable and amiable young lady of some twenty summers. She was very pretty, with large, mournful eyes, which a great portion of the time were concealed by a pair of green goggles worn on account of the weakness of her eyes contracted from a late spell of sickness.

Her face was a little thin and pale, yet bore ample traces of its natural beauty. Sylveen at once became struck with her lady-like appearance and gentle and affable manners. She spent most of the afternoon with Miss Gregory, and became so impressed with her in every respect, that, before she went home she had made a confidant of her, and told her all about her own troubles of that day.

Miss Martha expressed great surprise at Sylveen's story, and did all she could to assuage her sadness of heart. They talked on for some time, when Martha finally asked:

"Who told you, Sylveen, that Ralph St. Leger is the notorious Pirate Paul?"

"Mr. Scott Shirely, the fur-agent. Probably you have met him."

"Oh, yes. He is the handsome young fellow with the killing black mustache and red plume!"

"The same."

"Oh, I dare say all the young girls will be dead in love with him yet," and Martha laughed merrily.

Despite her sadness of heart, Sylveen laughed too, and admitted to herself that Martha was just such a girl as would make all happy around her.

"I have heard, Sylveen," continued Martha, "since we came here that your uncle had chosen Mr. Shirely as a husband for you. Is it the case?"

"It is, Miss Gregory."

"And is there no way of averting your uncle's will, in this matter?"

"None now, Martha, unless it is proven that Ralph St. Leger is not Pirate Paul. Uncle Abel is a very obstinate and selfish man, and I think he is actuated in this matter by cupidity, for he has intimated to me that Shirely is a wealthy man—heir to a large fortune in Montreal."

Miss Gregory uttered a little cry of surprise, and Sylveen noticed the color come and go in her face, and saw her compress her lips as if to keep back an outburst of emotion. It was several moments before she spoke, then her voice was lower and more earnest in its tones.

"Sylveen," she said, "I must admit that I am a curious person; and now I am going to make a confidant of you, and it will be all for your own good. Our coming here is not without a purpose. My name is not Martha Gregory, but I have assumed that name because it is the name of the family I live with. Like yourself, I am an orphan, and I have been wronged as others are now trying to wrong you. But, I will prevent them; but you must know me only as the daughter of Peter Gregory. I can thwart any project your uncle may put on foot for your marriage with any one to whom you are opposed. Remember that. I will also tell you, Sylveen, that Stony Cliff and half of its men are at my mercy, though they know it not. And here," she continued, taking Sylveen's hand in hers, and slipping a beautiful and curious wrought gold ring upon her finger—"I give you a ring which will be a charm against prairie pirates."

Sylveen seemed not a little puzzled by her words.

"It is true, Sylveen, however absurd it may sound to you. Whenever any person sees that ring and starts and stares at it as one would at a ghost, mark my words, *he is a prairie pirate!* If he should inquire where you got the ring, tell him it was a present from a friend. But do not, I implore you, tell him you received it of Martha Gregory, nor repeat one word of which I have told you."

Though she was strangely impressed by Miss Gregory's words, Sylveen promised that she would not hint one word of what she had told her. But no sooner had Martha told her that the ring was a charm against prairie robbers than she became sorely impatient to try its reputed magic power upon Ralph St. Leger, whom Scott Shirely had asserted was the notorious Pirate Paul.

CHAPTER V.

DEATH IN THE COUNCIL LODGE.

DEEP within the almost illimitable forest, and compassed by rugged hills and bluffs, stood the Indian village of the notorious old Sioux chief, Inkpaducah, whom history has given a record that ranks with the bloodiest of savage chieftains.

From Springfield to Okibogi and Spirit lakes, Inkpaducah's minions under Young Sleepy Eyes laid waste life and property indiscriminately. But when the neighboring settlements and military authorities pressed forward to chastise the barbarous foe, they fled from their old haunts and sought safety within the fastnesses of the woods and hills bordering the Sioux river, where we now find them, and where they remained until their final retreat beyond the Missouri.

The Indian village was some fifteen miles from Stony Cliff, and although the Indians and whites were on hostile terms, the former had never molested the settlers. Still, however, they had made many demonstrations of a threatening character, and consequently kept the whites in a constant state of uneasiness.

Toward the Indian village, through a storm that was raging, a solitary horseman was riding at a furious speed. It was night, black and gloomy, rendered doubly so by the deep shadows of the forest through which lay his course. Now and then the lightning shot in vivid flashes down through the tree-tops and lit up his grim, bearded face.

He was wrapped in the folds of a water-proof blanket, and wore a broad brimmed hat that was slouched to his shoulders. His hands and arms were drawn securely up under his blanket, giving the animal the reins and permitting it to take its own course, which it did to his rider's satisfaction.

This was evidence of itself that the horse was well accustomed to the path it was following, and surely that bearded stranger's mission must have been of great importance, or why would we have ventured out upon such a wild, stormy night as this?

On he galloped, now looming up like a Colossus into the lightning's glare, now fading away, as it were, into the blinding darkness that followed. But as he continued on, lights in the Indian village burst upon his view. A smile of joy passed over his grim, bearded face. He spurred on. A savage picket challenged him. He never slackened his pace, but gave a low whistle by which he was known, and galloped on, straight into the Indian town, following its crooked streets with the same familiarity with which he had traversed the forest.

Finally he drew rein before a large conical structure, whose imposing and central position told him it was the Council Lodge of the tribe.

Dismounting, he hitched his foaming, panting horse to a stake hard by, and strode up to the door of the lodge. Here he uttered a low whistle, then the flap-door was raised, and he was admitted into the lodge.

There were two persons in the lodge, Inkpaducah and a fellow chief. The latter held a glowing torch in his hand that lit up the lodge.

The white man threw aside his dripping hat and blanket, and took a seat facing the central lodge-pole.

"The gods frown angrily to-night, my red friends," he said, in the dialect of the Sioux.

"Le Subtile Fox, the Great Spirit is angry," replied Inkpaducah, speaking in the figurative language so characteristic of the Indian orator. "He speaks in tones of thunder, and hurls his lances of fire down upon the earth. He knows that death is in the forest, and has put a cloud over the brow of the heavens, and causes it to shed tears upon the earth, to wash out the stains of blood, and hide the trail of the Sioux from the eyes of Death-Notch, the Young Scalp-Hunter."

Before Le Subtile Fox could reply, the door was opened and a chief, wrapped in a blanket to protect him from the driving rain, entered the lodge and took his seat in the circle. He was soon followed by another and another, until the circle was almost full. As the rain was descending in torrents, each one came wrapped in his blanket, which was thrown hood-like over his head to protect his paint and feathered head-gear. Some of them, on taking their seats, did not remove their blankets, and could only be distinguished by each one's totem, which was wrought in bright colors upon his blanket.

Inkpaducah glanced over the party assembled and said:

"My young chiefs are all in but one. Red Antelope is still absent. But he will come soon—ugh, he is here now."

Red Antelope entered the lodge, enveloped from head to foot in his long, gray blanket.

"The council is full," said Inkpaducah; "let any one speak who has anything to say."

"Then I will ask you," said the renegade Le Subtile Fox, who, it was easy to see, wore a mask of false whiskers, "if Death-Notch has been in your camp again?"

"No; he dare not come within our village. But he prowls through the woods and strikes my braves down when they go alone to shoot the deer. Go where you will, his terrible death-notch may be seen upon the trees of the forest. And to-day comes the wail of another of my warriors whose cheek bears the totem of the Young Scalp-Hunter."

"Death-Notch is a terrible creature," said the white renegade; "but let the chief prepare, for another enemy is approaching."

"Let Le Subtile Fox speak. His voice is strong in the council."

"Well, a band of eight persons, young men, strong and brave, and calling themselves The Spirit Lake Avengers, are in the woods. They come to avenge the death of their friends slain by you at Okibogi and Spirit lakes. Omaha, the white man's friend, is with them!"

The brow of the chief became clouded, and his eyes flashed with a revengeful fire, while a low exclamation escaped the lips of his companions, and their breasts heaved with emotions of revenge.

"Let the young Omaha sing his death-song," the old chief at last broke forth; "the blood of a hundred of his friends reddened the snows of last winter, and their scalps are drying in the lodge of the Sioux. Sleepy Eyes, with a score of picked warriors, are upon the trail of Death-Notch. They will meet the Omaha and his white friends in the forest, and when they return they may bring the scalps of these Avengers as well as that of the terrible Death-Notch."

"Ugh!" ejaculated one of the savages in the circle of forms. It was Red Antelope, who still kept his face concealed with his blanket.

"Why does Red Antelope grunt?" asked the head chief, turning upon the savage with an indignant scowl. "Does he feel envious of the fame of young Sleepy Eyes? or does he doubt the words of Inkpaducah? Let Red Antelope speak."

The chief addressed arose to his feet, and drawing his blanket closer over his face as he did so, advanced to the center of the lodge, and putting out his tomahawk, struck the central pole twice with the keen edge of the weapon, cutting a deep notch in the stake.

"Ah!" exclaimed Inkpaducah, indignantly; "Red Antelope answers my questions by cutting the totem of Death-Notch upon the central pole. Is he a coward—a weak squaw? Does he fear Death-Notch? Let him speak."

"Inkpaducah," said the shrouded Red-Antelope, in a tone that caused the counselors to start, "you and your warriors are a set of fools. Red Antelope lies dead on the outskirts of your village by the hands of Death-Notch. The destroyer is at hand. He is even here in your council-lodge! Behold him!" cried the supposed warrior, flinging aside his blanket; "I am Death-Notch!"

A cry of terror pealed from the lips of the savage chieftains, and they started to their feet. But, at the same instant, they found themselves in blinding darkness.

The supposed Red Antelope, dashing to the earth the torch that lit up the lodge, instantly threw his thick, water-soaked blanket over it. Then arose a fearful yell, followed by direful confusion—a terrible struggle in the dark. Dull, sodden blows were heard, mingled with the crack, crack of a revolver, cries of agony, and shouts of triumph.

In the midst of the conflict, where chiefs struggled and grappled with chiefs, thinking that each was their detested foe Death-Notch, a figure glided from the council-lodge, and leaping onto the back of Le Subtile Fox's horse, dashed away through the village, night and storm into the almost impenetrable darkness of the woods.

The village was aroused. The cries of the chiefs sounded high above the roar of the rain and the rumble of the thunder.

Forth from their tents the warriors came pouring to the council-lodge. Then they learned that Death-Notch had been in their village, and had occupied a seat in their council. Upon the central pole was pointed out his totem, the death-notch, which he had cut with his own hand before their own eyes.

A dead chief, and two wounded ones, lying in the council-lodge confirmed this evidence—Death-Notch had been there.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW DANGER.

"DEATH-NOTCH is at the door."

The words fell from Omaha's lips like a thunderbolt from a cloudless winter sky. The Young Avengers started to their feet and gazed in speechless surprise at the door, as if expecting to see the young destroyer burst in upon them.

The shock had come unexpected, and although their number assured them of their ability to defy his power, they were thrown into a state of great suspense and anxiety, through their expectancy of standing face to face with the dreaded young Scalp-Hunter.

But while they thus stood with their eyes fixed upon the door, they were startled by a sound in the adjoining room. It was a dull, sodden sound, like that which would be produced by the fall of a heavy body. They fixed their eyes upon the partition door, then glanced from one to the other interrogatively.

Had Death-Notch entered the door by a secret passage? Who knew but that cabin was his own obscure retreat?

Scarcely had these questions formed in the minds of the Young Avengers when a

CAREFULLY THE HAND LIFTED THE VAIL, AND THE FIGURE GAZED UPON THE HANDSOME FACE OF PIRATE PAUL.—Page 1.



figure appeared in the doorway. But it was not Death-Notch. To their surprise, it was the form of a young Indian, whose gaudy head-dress bespoke the insignia of a chief. He was a Sioux, painted and plumed for the war-path. He was a tall, powerful fellow, with a broad, evil face, upon which rested a malicious, sinister smile; and his small black eyes seemed half-closed, as if dazzled by the light of the fire that was roaring on the hearth.

He stood directly in the doorway, with his muscular arms folded over his massive chest, in token of friendship and peace. There was something imposing in his powerful, handsome form, and his fearless, easy attitude, and for a moment our friends regarded him with a look of mingled surprise and admiration.

Then the hand of Omaha was seen to steal slowly toward his girdle, and a cloud of scorn and indignation to settle upon his dusky face. Then his lips were seen to part, and with all the disdain and insult which he could throw into his tone, he asked:

"Ugh! what does young Sleepy-Eyes, the dog of a Sioux, want here?"

"Scalps!" was the prompt and laconic reply of the haughty chief, as a grim smile swept over his broad, sensual face.

The hands of our young friends quickly flew to their belts; but, despite this hostile manifestation, young Sleepy-Eyes never moved a muscle, but seemed to be totally oblivious to the movement.

Omaha's native vindictiveness was beginning to rise to a point almost beyond restraint.

"Let the friends of Omaha," he said, addressing his friends, "look upon Sleepy-Eyes, the murderer of their friends, and say whether he shall stand there and defiantly tell us he is here for scalps."

Still Sleepy-Eyes never moved a muscle, but retained his silent, disdainful attitude.

To our white friends it now became evident that Omaha was the object of his contempt, and that he was waiting the address of an enemy more worthy of his august recognition. So Fred Travis addressed him in the Sioux dialect, of which he was master.

"What does the young Sioux chief seek here alone?" he asked.

Young Sleepy-Eyes drew himself up to his full height. His breast swelled out, and, with a slight toss of the plumed head, which indicated his recognition of young Travis, he replied:

"These woods are the hunting-grounds of the Sioux. He has a right to go where his will dictates. What do the young pale-faces seek here on our hunting-ground?"

"Shelter from the storm was the object that brought us to this cabin," replied Fred, evasively.

"But you carry arms," said the chief, glancing at their rifles leaning against the wall; "and a dog of an Omaha keeps you company."

A fierce, revengeful light shot from the eyes of Omaha. His fingers tightened upon the haft of his tomahawk, and but for the look which Fred gave him he would have struck the chief down. He had learned forbearance of the white man; and, turning on his heel with a contemptuous smile, walked away. But of all this the young chief seemed totally unconscious, showing with what contempt an Indian regards an enemy of his own race.

"Omaha," said Travis, "is our friend and guide."

"But why do the young white braves wander so far from the lodges of their fathers?"

"Go ask the waters of Okibogi and Spirit lakes. Listen to the winds whispering to the forest-leaves of what they saw when the Sioux and Dacotahs were there. Our fathers are dead, and their wigwams are in ashes."

"Then the children of the white braves have come to avenge their death?" said Sleepy-Eyes.

"We have not harmed the hair of a Sioux's head," replied Travis. "We have come to ascertain whether the Sioux carried any of our friends away into captivity."

"Go then to our village and see," returned Sleepy-Eyes, and there was an undercurrent in his tone and looks which our friends did not fail to understand.

Death-Notch was altogether forgotten by the whites. They supposed at once Omaha had mistaken Sleepy-Eyes—who had entered by some secret passage—for the young Scalp-Hunter. But it seemed a little strange to them that Sleepy-Eyes should appear so overbearing and insolent unless it was a veil to conceal his savage fears.

The storm without was growing fiercer each moment. Drops of rain, mingled with hail, had begun to fall in a sullen and continuous roar upon the roof.

"Perhaps," said young Travis, determined to show the chief no favors, "you can tell us whether you have any of our friends captives, or not?"

"And if I refuse, what then?" asked the chief.

"We will be compelled to detain you a prisoner until you give us the desired information, or exchange you, should we find any of our friends are captives."

A scornful smile convulsed the bronzed, sen-

sual face of the young chief. He made no reply to Travis' remarks, but stepped to one side from the passage. Then what was our young friends' surprise to see a second Indian appear in the doorway, from the shadows of the adjacent room.

A dark suspicion rushed suddenly across our young friends' minds, and that suspicion was soon verified when they saw this second savage step aside and a third one appear, followed by a fourth, fifth, and so on, until ten grim and hideous Indian warriors stood before them, tomahawk in hand.

Fred now knew the cause of the chief's insolence, and realized what a terrible blunder they had committed.

Without a doubt the cunning Sioux had ensconced themselves in the dark loft, or adjacent room, before they had entered the cabin, and yet with such cunning and caution that not the least sign of their presence had been discovered by the keen, watchful eyes of Omaha.

An indiscriminate massacre now seemed imminent. The young men had laid aside most of their weapons, and one movement toward their recovery would be the signal for the Indians to strike. In the breast pocket of his hunting-shirt, however, Fred Travis carried a small pistol, and in order to get hold of it without awakening suspicion, he calmly folded his arms across his breast, permitting his hand to slip into his pocket as he did so.

At the same instant the same thought seemed to have inspired his companions, and instead of manifesting a fear corresponding with their danger, they assumed an attitude of ease and indifference.

There were several moments of silence, during which time the two lines of enemies stood eying each other, the savages with faces aglow with fiendish triumph; the whites with faces that wore the calmness of brave men when their lives stand in imminent peril.

Sleepy-Eyes was the first to break the silence. He spoke to Fred Travis, who stood directly in front of him.

"Will the young pale-face still say he will keep Sleepy-Eyes a prisoner? Or does his bravery grow weak at the sight of my warriors?"

Fred felt as keenly the retort of the chief as he did the peril of his situation; but with creditable promptness he replied:

"I care not to idle words with Sleepy-Eyes, but if he has come here to quarrel with us, he will never leave here alive with his warriors."

A low, silent and mocking laugh escaped the savage's lips, and but for this slight confusion they might have heard the click of Fred's pistol-lock in his bosom; but to his threat, the chief retorted:

"Sleepy-Eyes quarrels not with an inferior foe."

"But he will scalp innocent women and children, like a sneaking coward," replied Fred, indignantly. The youth saw what was coming—that a conflict was inevitable—and he resolved to resent in words, at least, the insults of the subtle savage.

"Ugh!" ejaculated the chief. "The pale-face speaks now like a weak squaw—with a crooked tongue."

These were the last words the contemptuous chief ever uttered. There was a flash before his eyes, the crack of a pistol, and he fell dead with a bullet-hole through his forehead.

Then arose a savage yell, mingled with the battle-cry of the Young Avengers, and the next instant the two lines seemed to dissolve into one. Knives and pistols leaped from their concealments, and tomahawks flashed in the light of the fire as they rose and fell through the air; and high above the roar of the storm without rung the cries of the combatants, the shrieks of the dying and the clash of steel.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONFLICT AND ITS RESULT.

It was a fearful moment there, within the deserted hut. Stung to fury by the death of their chief, the savages pressed hard upon the Young Avengers. But the latter were trained, strong and skillful, and while they managed to ward off the blows of the savages, they made every shot and thrust count. Some grappled and fought hand to hand, but, with his tomahawk in his hand, Omaha struck right and left with terrible precision. It seemed impossible that men could fight so hard and long, and none of them fall, but for several minutes the conflict seemed about equal. None had fallen, yet several were wounded on both sides, for the floor was getting wet and slippery with their blood.

Suddenly, above the din of the conflict and roar of the storm, a wild voice was heard without demanding admittance to the cabin, each shout being accompanied by a heavy blow upon the cabin door. But this lasted only for a moment. The door yielded, and a figure rushed in—the figure of a man. In one hand he held a tomahawk, in the other one of the then most deadly weapons of the day, a Colt's revolver. From the latter weapon report after report rung out, and, as an accompaniment, the to-

hawk rose and fell with deadly precision upon the heads of the savage foe.

The tide of battle turned in a moment.

"Death-Notch! Death-Notch!" burst in accents of terror from the lips of the savages, and the few that were alive and able, fled from the hut, and sought safety under cover of the night and storm. The conflict was ended. Six of the ten savages lay dead and dying. Three of the Avengers were seriously wounded, and but for the cramped position in which the savages were compelled to fight with their tomahawks, some of the Avengers would have undoubtedly been slain.

In a minute, almost, after the conflict, most of its terrors were forgotten by the Young Avengers, in the startling realization of their being in the presence of the terrible Death-Notch, he who had burst in during the conflict and routed the savages.

Not a little surprised were our friends to see that the young Scalp-Hunter was of about medium size, and wore a regular hunter-garb of buck-skin. His head-gear, however, was quite a novelty. It was a steel cap, not altogether unlike the *morion* worn by the warriors of the middle ages. To this cap was attached a beaver which entirely concealed the face. But masses of long, rippling black hair fell down his back, and black, fiery eyes gleamed through the holes of his mask.

Fred Travis' mind at once reverted to the youthful horseman he had seen that day in the forest—the same whom Omaha had said was Death-Notch, and whom he had said was a female. The being before him seemed larger than the horseman; but then he was dressed differently. And there was that same wealth of raven tresses, regal head and swelling chest. But were they one and the same person?

Our young friends seeing that he offered them no violence—in fact, had proven a friend in the most dangerous moment of their lives—supposed at once that he was some eccentric being, more daring than wise.

Fred Travis was the first to speak.

"Your coming was very opportune."

"Glad to hear it," said the stranger, in a tone that was soft and musical as a woman's. "But then you were pressing the red devils closely, my young friends."

"Pardon me, but may I ask who you are?"

The masked avenger made no reply, but raising aloft his tomahawk, he struck the wall twice with its keen edge, and chipped out a small notch thereon.

"Do you understand that?" he asked.

"It is the *death-notch* of the young Scalp-Hunter."

"As such I am known," replied the avenger, "though I hope I am not as terrible a creature to you as I am reputed to be to the whites. The whites are my own race and friends; but the Sioux—curse them!—I am mad-crazy with hatred and vengeance toward them!"

The young Scalp-Hunter did not remove his mask, but passed his hand over it occasionally, to see that no part of his face was exposed. But, despite this eccentricity, the Young Avengers became decidedly easy over the true character of Death-Notch. That he was young there was not a single doubt. That he was a deadly foe of the savages was no more than they had anticipated, and those fabulous stories of his colossal size were proven to be "moonshine."

A cry of pain from one of the Avengers drew the attention of his companions from Death-Notch, and they at once proceeded to ascertain the extent of each one's injury, and dress the wounds as well as their surgical skill would admit. In this they were assisted by the young Scalp-Hunter, who showed that he had a heart capable of the tenderest of human sympathies.

The wounded being cared for, the band began removing the lifeless savages from the cabin; and while thus engaged, the crack of a rifle was suddenly heard without. A bullet whizzed into the room through the open door, and Death-Notch was heard to utter a low, quick gasp, and was seen to stagger and sink to his knees.

The door was instantly closed and barred by Omaha, while Fred Travis sprang to Death-Notch's assistance, exclaiming:

"My God, young friend, are you shot?"

"Not bad," was the laconic reply of the young Scalp-Hunter, as he arose to his feet. "I did, however, receive quite a blow from an ounce ball of lead; but there was insufficient powder behind it to do its work. See there."

As he spoke, he drew from the bosom of his hunting-shirt a battered bullet, and handed it to Fred for inspection. There was no trick about it. It was a genuine leaden ball, still warm with the heat of the powder and the friction of the concussion.

The sight of this bullet filled the young men with no little surprise and wonder. By what power was the Scalp-Hunter enabled to stay the danger of a leaden ball? It looked a little strange.

Death-Notch saw that our friends were puzzled, and at once drew their attention from the incident by an evasive remark.

In a short time the excitement had subsided, and the Lake Avengers found themselves in a general conversation with the masked stranger.

They found him to be a person of more than ordinary character. His language was guarded, but showed evidence of some educational refinements and good thoughts. But when asked why he pursued such a course of vengeance, he replied:

"I can not help it. This may seem an absurd assertion to you, but it is true. There are times, however, when my soul shudders with horror at the deeds of my vengeance. Then again my heart becomes fired uncontrollably with that maddening passion. I can not fight it back. It comes upon me like the spasms of one addicted to periodical attacks of insanity. Yet, for all this, I feel that I have a just cause for my deeds of revenge. And I think sometimes, however absurd that thought may be, that Heaven justifies me in my course. And there are other savages yet to feel the weight of my vengeance, as I have felt and suffered the weight of their barbarity. The cries of a tortured mother and angel sister ring in my ears in fancy as they did in reality, for long bitter weeks, while in the hands of these red fiends. And as I was compelled to witness their suffering, agony, and shame, so shall their captors witness my revenge."

A deep silence followed this revelation of sorrow and vengeance. Every heart had been alike touched with pity and revenge. The Avengers felt that their own fates were in a manner connected with that of the young Scalp-Hunter, and at once made known to him the object that had led them into the country.

When he had heard their story of the murder of their friends at the lakes, Death-Notch expressed his heartfelt sympathies for them, and promised to aid them, as far as possible, in their endeavors to rescue their friends. Yet, despite these kind-hearted manifestations, he would not reveal his features.

For over an hour the storm continued to rage in all its fury. Finally it began to break away, and by midnight the heavens were clear and the stars were shining bright and sparkling. The moon came up, and then Death-Notch turned to the Young Avengers, and said:

"Friends, the storm is over. We are only about ten miles from the Indian village, and if we remain here any longer, the savage, or whoever it was that attempted my life a while ago, will bring the whole Sioux tribe upon us."

"Then we had better not delay a moment in seeking other quarters," said Fred Travis.

The little band at once proceeded to act upon Fred's suggestion, and procuring their weapons, they left the deserted hut. It was, however, with great difficulty that the three wounded youths journeyed through the forest without assistance.

Death-Notch advised them to proceed at once to Stony Cliff, where the wounded would be safe and receive the proper attention. The village was some fifteen miles away, and acting upon the masked youth's advice, they bent their footsteps in that direction.

The Scalp-Hunter was to accompany them several miles, when his homeward course would lead him in another direction.

As they moved slowly onward, guided by Omaha, Fred and the mysterious Death-Notch followed on a short distance behind, conversing in low tones. They had journeyed in this manner several miles when those in front discovered that Fred and Death-Notch were nowhere in sight or hearing. So they stopped and waited for them several minutes, but they did not come up.

Meanwhile they were startled by what seemed to be the report of a pistol. The sound was behind, though some distance away.

There was something singular about Fred's absence and about that shot. What did it all mean? Surely they had not got into trouble with a band of skulking Indians, or other sounds would have been heard. Was it possible that Death-Notch had dealt foully with Fred?

The Avengers sent Omaha back to investigate. But he soon returned and Fred was not with him. His face wore a clouded expression that spoke louder than words to his companions.

Fred Travis could not be found!

CHAPTER VIII. THE HIDDEN RANCHE.

FOR more than a century past, white renegades, outlaws and pirate pirates have been one of the most active elements of evil of the frontiers, and have been almost as detrimental to the advancement of civilization as the red-man himself.

They are usually composed of a class of men who, having become the dregs of moral society and not being able to live without violating the laws of their country, flee from the vengeance of that law to the frontier, where they can have ample scope for their wicked inclinations. And here within the dominions of the red-man, they gather into bands, and although there may be a certain code of honor among themselves, that honor does not extend beyond their own dens.

In their piratical raids upon the settlements and emigrant parties, these freebooters are seldom actuated by cupidity, but more to give action to their reckless and destructive spirit. If pressed hard or likely to be caught, they have

a welcome resort of safety under the strong arm of the red-skins, whose will they always aim to keep so pliable that it will readily bend to their own purposes.

The country in and about Stony Cliff was infested with a band of these prairie freebooters, led by a notorious scamp called Pirate Paul.

The depredations of this band had been less frequent at Stony Cliff than any other settlements along the river below, and for over a year Pirate Paul had roamed over a goodly portion of the western territory, creating as much fear and excitement, almost, among the settlers as Inkpaducah and his host. But, what was most singular about this pirate band, it could never be traced to any den or stronghold, and their ubiquity seemed marvelous. However, it was generally believed that their head-quarters were somewhere in the vicinity of Stony Cliff. They had been traced by experienced scouts to the river's bank within a mile of the village. Here they had always taken to the water and further traces of them could not be found. It was very strange, too, where they went to. In fact, the whole thing was clothed in a bit of mystery that the shrewdest detective and most skillful scouts could not solve.

In the meantime, Pirate Paul was apprised of every movement they made, and laughed to scorn their every attempt at finding him. By a systematic procedure, and the assistance of a number of able spies, he was always ready to defeat their plans; and upon one occasion he managed to implicate his pursuers as the real robbers, themselves.

On the night following that of the storm, a number of the settlers of Stony Cliff were met in consultation with several settlers of Clontarf's Post—a settlement some fifteen miles down the river.

The settlers of the latter place had, on the night before the storm, sustained a heavy robbery, and on the night of the storm two or three persons had been robbed at Stony Cliff.

The settlers of Clontarf had tracked the robbers within two miles of Stony Cliff, when the storm came on and obliterated every sign of their trail.

The two parties were met in order to take some steps for a more general and thorough search for Pirate Paul's den than had ever been made.

But, at the same time that the settlers were in council, Pirate Paul and his men, numbering in all fifteen, were in council, also. The apartment in which these freebooters sat was a spacious subterranean room, bearing the handiwork of the great Architect of the Hills.

It is the hour of midnight when we would conduct the reader through mazes of tangled forests, and dark, echoless hill chambers into the hidden ranche of Pirate Paul.

Around a rough deal table upon which were cards, dice, bottles and glasses, we see the robbers sitting. Each of them, for some reason or other, has a red head-band around his brow. To this is attached a small, white vail that hangs down over the face, so that we cannot see the features. Upon each of these vails we see a red figure, and by these figures the robbers know each other instead of their names. They seem to adhere to method and form—a form as old as that of the Senatorial Council of the Roman Inquisition.

Pirate Paul was known as Number One, and the flaming figure upon his vail told which the captain was. They sat around the table in the order of their numbers. One being first; and although there were but fifteen present, the last number was Seventeen. Why was this? Glance around that circle of form and you will see that Seven and Ten are missing.

They are not boisterous in their conversation. They speak in guarded tones, as though afraid of being overheard. Cards and dice seem to occupy the minds of the robbers as we enter; but as the moments wear on, they hear a clear young voice say:

"Number Ten seems to be detained for some reason or other."

"Give him time, Captain Paul," said Number Three. "You know it's a long way to Stony Cliff."

A low, half-suppressed laugh followed this remark.

"Probably the settlers are on the alert, or some one is at the cabin, and can't get away," said Five. "Never fear. The spy will be here at the proper time."

"Yes, if he hasn't turned traitor, like El Pardou," said Six.

"In that case," replied Pirate Paul, "we'll serve him as we did Pardou: take him to the woods and hang him, and put Death-Notch's stamp upon him. But then I think we need have no fear."

"Not a bit o' it," growled Thirteen, "for he's comin' this blessed minit."

True enough, footsteps were heard descending a flight of steps, and a moment later the person in question appeared in their midst, with vailed face.

It was the spy, Number Ten.

"Well, you're back at last," said Pirate Paul.

"Back," was the laconic reply of Ten.

"Any news?"

"Lots of it. The settlers have been in deliberation as to Pirate Paul and Co. The Clontarf's are terrible wrothy over that little affair."

"Ah! what else?"

"Say that Scott Shirely, the Hudson Bay agent, has discovered and revealed to Sylveen Gray the fact that her lover, Ralph St. Leger, is Pirate Paul."

Again the robbers laughed.

"Go on, Ten; what else?" asked the impatient chief.

"They blame Death-Notch of El Pardou's death. They say the Gregory family have some little cash and valuables. The search for our ranche will begin just as soon as Scott Shirely and a party of his traders and trappers return from the Omaha country, where they're gone for peltries. The seven Young Avengers, under the Friendly Omaha, are still at the Cliff, though they are yet in a terrible stew about their captain, Fred Travis, I think they call him. They've been searching all day for him; they think he has fallen a victim to Death-Notch."

"Well," said Pirate Paul, "we'll have to lay quiet for a while. At least, until that general search for our ranche is over with; and we had better arrange it so as to take a part in the search. But while those Avengers are about, we'll have to be careful. That Omaha is a cunning chap, with an eye like a cat and a nose like a hound. After all is quiet, we'll wait on the Gregory family and see about their cash and valuables."

After some further remarks the council of robbers broke up. The vailed men arose from their seats, and sought their couches in various parts of the cavern. Pirate Paul and Number Ten, however, still remained in a private consultation.

"Now, Finchley," said the robber chief, when they were alone, "tell me what you learned of Sylveen Gray—whether Scott Shirely is likely to win her from her robber-lover, Ralph St. Leger."

"It's hard tellin', capt'in. Miss Gray is no fool. True, Shirely told her that *you*, capt'in, war Pirate Paul—that is, Ralph St. Leger; but she don't seem to believe it. She and Miss Martha Gregory are thick as a swarm of bees, and I heard Miss Martha tell her that she did not like the looks of Scott Shirely."

"What kind of a looking girl is that Gregory?"

"Young—about twenty. She's handsome, and got sweet blue eyes, pretty ripe lips, and a heavenly form."

"Quite a vivid description," laughed Pirate Paul; "but what seems to be her objection to Shirely?"

"Don't know. Acts as though she's known him before."

Pirate Paul started, and Finchley noticed that he became uneasy.

"Finchley," he at length said, "I want you to keep a close watch upon the movements of that girl. She may be an enemy of mine, and attempt to defeat my meetings with Sylveen Gray. If I find that such is the case, then will I do what I have long contemplated: carry Sylveen away by force, and compel her to wed me."

"I'll keep a watch out, Capt'in Ralph," returned the robber-spy.

"Then hasten back to the Cliff, and apprise me from time to time of the movements of the settlers."

"All square, Cap. Good-night," replied the spy; and rising from his seat, he glided away through the cavern like an eel.

Pirate Paul, the young robber chief, now sat alone, and he at once became deeply absorbed in thought. As the moments wore on, he rested his elbow on the table and his head on his palm. In this position he fell asleep.

Something like half an hour had passed, when a figure wrapped in a blanket, with a white vail over the face, stole on tip-toe from the shadows of the cavern toward the sleeping robber. When within reach of him it stopped, and from the folds of the blanket put out a small, white hand.

It was a woman's hand, without a doubt. Carefully it lifted the vail that covered the face of Pirate Paul, and the figure gazed upon the handsome features of the robber, expressionless in slumber.

For a moment the figure remained thus, apparently transfixed by the face of the young pirate-chief; then it turned and glided away in the direction it had come on.

And Pirate Paul slept on.

CHAPTER IX.

A BLOW IN THE DARK.

LET us now return and look after Fred Travis, whom we left with Death-Notch, in a preceding chapter.

The young captain and the mysterious Scalp-Hunter followed on without hearing of Omaha and the Avengers, conversing without restraint upon the dangers that surrounded them.

"Then, can you not go to Stony Cliff with us?" Fred asked.

"No, Travis," he replied, with that usual familiarity of the backwoodsman. "I have

taken upon myself an oath never to enter a white settlement until I have unburdened my heart of its load of vengeance. Besides, there is another person in this world claiming my presence and protection."

"Ah! a wife, or sister, perhaps?" thought Fred, but he did not give expression to his thoughts. He did not wish to appear inquisitive, so evaded the subject by at once introducing another.

They moved on, conversing in low tones; but Fred noticed, finally, that Death-Notch's voice was changing—that he spoke in a quick, excited tone. At length he came to a sudden halt, and said:

"My God, Travis! It is coming on me again! Go on and leave me. I might—"

"What is the matter, Death-Notch?" asked Fred, startled by the unearthly expression of his voice, and the dull scintillation of his eyes through the holes of his mask.

"I am going mad, Travis, mad!" replied Death-Notch, grasping a limb, as if for support. "Oh God! such a passion is awful. It is not one of physical or mental debility, but a fit—a fit of revenge. I can not keep it back. Go, leave me, quick—quick, Travis!"

"But, Death-Notch let me stay and take care of you."

"Ho! ho! a legion of demons couldn't hold me. You have been with me already too long. When I am away from all white faces, save hers, then I am human, unless a savage is about. But faces that are white and voices like my own recall days that are gone—they excite me—put that awful devil in my heart! Go, Travis, go, go, go!"

Filled with that species of terror which one experiences when in the presence of a madman, Fred, in obedience to the strange youth's request, turned and pushed rapidly on in pursuit of his friends; though he was loth to leave the mysterious Death-Notch alone, for fear harm would befall him while laboring under his violent attack of madness.

During his halt with the youth, Fred had permitted quite a distance to grow between him and his friends; and now, as he fled onward from the mad Death-Notch, he suddenly became aware that he was off their trail. Still he pressed on, in hopes of coming up with them soon; but in this he was disappointed. He stopped and listened for them, but he could hear nothing. He was in the act of calling to them, when the quick, heavy tread of moccasined feet broke upon his ears. He supposed at once it must be Death-Notch following him, and as he did not wish to encounter the mad youth, nor use severe means of protection against him, he sped on toward Stony Cliff. Still, that ominous footstep sounded behind him, and he renewed his exertions; yet, despite his efforts, his pursuer gained upon him each moment.

At length he felt his strength beginning to fail, and that swift patter, patter of feet filled him with terror. It was a precarious situation to be thus pursued by a friend—a mad, crazy friend—who was seeking his life—the life he had been instrumental in saving at the deserted hut. Travis pressed every nerve into the effort, and exerted himself to the utmost. But, steadily, those pursuing feet came nearer and nearer.

Fred turned at last, and drew his pistol.

"Back! back!" he shouted; "is it you, Death-Notch?"

"Yes! yes!" echoed an unearthly voice.

Fred raised his pistol on the shadowy form he saw approaching through the undergrowth.

He pressed the trigger as it came nearer. There was a flash and a sharp report.

Still the figure came on. The bullet had missed its mark.

Fred grappled with the form. A sharp struggle ensued, but it lasted only for a moment.

Then young Travis sunk unconscious under a crushing blow upon the head. Had Death-Notch dealt that blow?

CHAPTER X.

A MIDNIGHT DRAMA.

THE hour was midnight. The Little Sioux river, swollen by the recent rain, was plunging madly on, bearing upon its turbulent, throbbing bosom immense bodies of driftwood and debris.

There was a sullen roar of the waves as they beat and churned themselves to a foam, in their mad endeavors to break beyond the confines of their channel. This, however, they will soon do—in less than an hour—when the little, over-gorged streams have poured their united mites into the roaring river.

Forth from the deep shadows of the woods bordering the stream, there suddenly emerged a human form, bearing in its arms a heavy, lifeless object. Upon the bank of the angry river the figure stopped, and gazed up and down for several moments.

Hard by lay a large log upon which the figure finally deposited its burden. Then it busied itself for some time around the log, apparently engaged in lashing the object to it.

Ten minutes later, no sign of life was there. The mysterious figure had vanished into the gloomy shadows of the woods.

Then followed an ominous silence that was broken only by the rush and roar of the river. But, as the minutes wore on, a sharp bark sud-

denly issued from the solitude of the woods. Then, forth from the dark, deep shadows of the tangled forest came a grim, gaunt wolf.

The prowling brute stole near the log upon which the figure had deposited its burden, and sniffed and snarled around it, then, as with affright, it scampered away into the shadows of the wood again.

But it soon returned; nor was it alone. A dozen of its grim, gray associates came along.

Around the log the wolfish pack began to gather, as if preparing for a banquet. Their sharp barks and long howls awoke the silent echoes for miles, and called other friends trooping to the spot.

Soon a score of dark, shaggy forms were seething and plunging like a vortex about the log.

Why were they there? What quarry were they about to attack?

Still they continue to close around the log, nearer and nearer, their glowing eyes scintillating like beads of fire floating athwart the darkness. At last one of the brutes ventures to shut his glittering teeth upon the object upon the log, but at the same instant they all recoil like a receding wave, and a groan—a human groan issues from the center of that circle of ravenous beasts.

A human being is lashed upon the log! Who was it? And who with the heart of a demon had been so cruel as to put a fellow-being in such an awful position?

The wolves soon recover from their affright. They rally, and again begin circling around the log, gradually closing in toward it. They are cunning, and feel their way with caution.

Another groan bursts from the lips of the unfortunate being. Again the wolves recoil, but they soon close in again. They are growing bolder. They are closing for the attack.

The doomed man—for man it is—seems to understand his danger. He struggles to free himself; he tries to break the thongs that hold him down; he hears the roar of the river hard by; and now he feels their hot breath upon his cheek; he cannot defend himself—he can only cry to Heaven for help. But he seems deserted by all—even Heaven. For now a huge beast fastens its fangs upon his arm, and tears at the tender, quivering flesh.

Oh, what a piteous cry bursts forth upon the air! But, there is no pitying ear to hear it. The wolves have nothing to fear. They seem to know it, and close in for their feast.

But hark! what thunderous noise? It comes like the booming roar of breakers dashing over a stony reef. It is water! The swollen waves of the river have broken from its banks, and are sweeping madly along the shore in one mighty, resistless flood, bearing everything before it.

The wolves utter a cry of affright. They turn from the object of their banquet to flee. But they are too late. The flood grasps them up in its strong embrace, and they are carried away on its foaming bosom. But they are not alone. In their midst, tossing and rolling upon the torrent, is that human form still lashed to the log.

CHAPTER XI.

A WHITE, WHITE FACE.

THE scene changes. It is midday. The sun looks down from a clear sky. The air is cool and bracing, and comes laden with a fresh perfume, sweet as the delicious fragrance of Araby or Ind. The forest is redolent with its songs of nature—who has not heard them in the wilderness?

It was like walking through a wildwood just from the hands of the Creator to traverse that forest, where, but the night before, the storm-winds wrestled with the giant trees, and where death and mystery stalked abroad. And the river, which had broken from its confines and rushed and roared across the lowlands, had spent its fury and might, and sunk back within its channels.

Not a sound could be heard nor a living object seen. The place seemed tenantless—an uninhabited solitude—unpressed by the foot of man or beast—a hallowed temple, or the home of invisible spirits.

But this was not the case. There was life within the forest and upon the river.

As the sun declined westward from his noon-tide meridian, a small bark-canoe shot suddenly out into the river from the mouth of a little creek, over whose waters the dense foliage formed a dark, green archway.

In the little craft was seated a maiden, who had scarcely passed her sixteenth summer. She was a being of rare loveliness—sylph-like in form and feature. Her eyes were dark and lustrous, and shaded by long silken lashes. A wealth of dark hair was gathered back from a brow of Grecian mold and permitted to flow in rippling waves down over her snowy neck and shoulders.

She was dressed in a frock reaching only to her knees, and made in a style harmonizing with her form and beauty. A little straw hat, probably the labor of her own hands, crowned her head.

Before her lay a small silver-mounted rifle,

while in her belt she wore a small stiletto-like knife.

She handled the paddle with great skill and dexterity, and sent the little craft flying up the stream, keeping within the shadows of the western bank.

A bright, healthful glow was upon her soft, rosy cheeks, and a sparkling light in her dark eyes.

Lightly the little canoe danced over the waters, while its fair occupant kept a close watch around her, as if expecting some one, or as if on the look-out for danger. She continued to paddle her canoe on up the stream, never permitting her vigilance to relax for a moment.

At length her eye was arrested by a number of dark specks sailing in the air, some distance up the river. They were buzzards. And the forest beauty knew that their presence was attracted there by something below—something that promised them a feast.

They might be only following a party of savages like the sneaking wolf, for by instinct these birds have learned that the trail of a war-party is invariably marked with bloodshed and deserted quarry.

The maiden permitted the canoe to come to a stand while she watched the circling birds. She saw at once they were coming closer and closer, and seemed to be following the course of the river. She felt satisfied that it was some object on the bosom of the stream that the filthy birds were following. It might be a lifeless carcass, or, perchance, a convoy of savages going down the river. Startled by the last thought, and grasping the paddle firmly, she ran her canoe close in shore, and concealed herself under the drooping willows in a little cove, from whence she could still command a view of the river, some distance above.

She saw the buzzards still approaching—at times almost settling down to the tree-tops, then starting up again as if with affright. She now felt sure they were following a party of Indians, and listened intently to catch the dip of their paddles, or some sound that would confirm her belief.

But she heard nothing. The birds came closer and closer—now so clear that she can see their bald heads and naked coral necks bent downward toward the bosom of the river.

Something is there. She can see it rounding the bend of the stream above her. It was a large log floating on the surface. As it comes nearer, a cry bursts from the lips of the forest beauty, and horror is stamped upon her fair, sweet face. Upon the log she sees a human form lashed. It is the form of a man. It is bound upon the back, while the white, white face is staring heavenward. But there is no motion in it. It is lifeless!

CHAPTER XII.

AN ANGEL OF MERCY.

LIKE a graven image, the forest beauty sat with eyes fixed on the terrible sight before her—a man, apparently dead, and lashed upon a floating log.

As the terrible object came nearer, she saw that the unfortunate being was a white man—a mere youth. His arms were bent backward, and bound in a painful position. His clothes were soaking wet, and his dark hair was tangled over his head and neck in dripping masses.

Human pity and kindness asserted their power within the breast of the maiden. She knew at once some cruel foe had placed that unfortunate youth there, and she resolved to free him. But would it be of earthly use? Was he not beyond human aid?—dead?

The maiden gazed intently at him for this information. To her horror and disgust she saw a large buzzard settle down on the log, by the motionless head of the youth. Her soul sickened with a strange horror and suspense, for the next instant she expected to see the filthy bird bury its beak in the eyes of the dead. But a thought struck her—she would prevent the mutilation of that fair, boyish face.

She grasped her rifle and drew back the hammer. Just then she saw the vulture crane its neck and peer down into the pale, upturned face before it, with an almost human interrogative look. Then it uttered a startled cry, spread its great somber wings, and rose aloft into the air.

A cry of joy burst involuntarily from the maiden's lips. To her the bird's actions spoke plainer than words. The youth bound upon the log was not dead!

It did not require a second thought to decide the maiden's course of action. A few strokes of her paddle carried the little craft alongside of the floating log. She drew the keen little blade from her belt, and hastily severed the thongs that bound the beautiful young stranger in his awful position.

He was totally unconscious, and it required a great effort of the maiden to lift his form in her canoe. But she accomplished it with safety, and a murmur of thanks to Heaven issued from her tremulous lips. The next moment she was driving her canoe rapidly down the river.

She soon came to the mouth of the little creek from which she had debouched into the river, a few minutes before. Up this green

SHE GRASPED HER RIFLE, AND DRAWING BACK THE HAMMER, TOOK STEADY AIM.—Page 6.



archway, sweet and cool as an Arcadian aisle, she headed her tiny craft, and plied the paddle with all the vigor her delicate frame possessed.

Ever and anon she gazed down into the unconscious face before her. It was boyish in feature, yet manly in expression. It was handsome, and wore a look of refinement; and the maiden's heart beat wildly and joyfully in anticipation of the moment when those eyes would open and those pale lips speak to her.

On she drove the canoe. She had traveled over half a mile, when she turned abruptly to the left, and entered the mouth of another stream. This she followed through dark forest and under tangled foliage for some fifty rods, when she suddenly burst into a little sunlit glade, in the center of which stood a little vine-embowered cabin.

It was a lovely spot—a miniature paradise. Flowers grew on every side, while the whole was compassed on all sides by the dark, green forest.

Running her canoe ashore, the maiden landed, and, tripping along the little glade, entered the cabin with a familiarity that told it was her home. In a moment she returned, followed by a young man whose features bore a striking resemblance to her. It was the youth that met Sylveen Gray, the day previous, near Stony Cliff. It was Ralph St. Leger!

His face did not look so bright as when we first saw him. It was a little pale and haggard, and his eyes were heavy and hollow, as though he had just recovered from a spell of sickness.

"Where did you find the young man, sister Vida?" asked Ralph, as together they crossed the glade.

"On the river, Ralph, lashed to a floating log. Some person must have had a demon's heart to bind him there. He is so young and handsome, and I know he is not a bad man."

They came to the canoe, and as Ralph St. Leger gazed down upon the face of the unconscious youth in the canoe, his face turned very pale, and he started slightly. But his sister did not notice his emotion. She was too absorbed in emotions of her own over the young stranger's welfare.

"Ah! a stranger," said St. Leger.

"Yes," responded Vida, "and think you there is any hope for him?"

"There may be. I will carry him to the cabin, and we must do all we can to restore him to life."

Ralph stepped into the canoe, and lifting the unconscious young stranger in his strong arms, carried him to the cabin and placed him on a soft couch.

"Now, Vida," said Ralph, "you will have to be spry. We'll have to labor long and hard to bring him to life. While I chafe the limbs and bathe his brow, you prepare some strong herb tea for stimulants. I see, little Vida, the handsome face of the stranger has awakened a wonderful interest in your young heart."

Tears of joy gathered in Vida's eyes. The long lashes drooped upon the olive cheeks, and a crimson flush swept over her pretty face. She made no reply to her brother's remark, but turned away and was soon busy in another apartment, preparing stimulants for the young, unconscious stranger.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW EXISTENCE.

WHEN Fred Travis recovered from the stunning blow, which he was sure had been dealt him by Death-Notch, he first became conscious of the fact that he was lying upon a soft couch, while dark walls surrounded him. He could not recall his situation. His senses were confused and bewildered, his brain was feverish and excited. Weird visions of demons were flitting before his eyes, and now and then he could see a colossal shadow pass before him.

He was conscious of existence, yet he was in doubt as to the state of that existence. His surroundings did not seem of earth. He had surely passed into another sphere. His senses struggled to assert their former power, but something like a vague charm held them asunder—a charm that no effort of his own will could break.

But, suddenly, a sound like that of a footstep broke upon his ear, and that strange spell was broken, and reason with Fred Travis had asserted its throne. He started up and gazed in confusion around him. He felt of his aching, throbbing head. A bandage was upon it.

But where was he? He gazed around the room in which he lay. It was almost dark, yet he was enabled to see its outer walls were made of logs. Before him hung a curtain that separated his room from one more commodious. He drew aside the curtain and looked out into the apartment. He started with surprise. The room was flooded with the light of day and furnished with the elegance of an Oriental boudoir! The walls were covered with woven hangings of a rich, harmonious color that formed a beautiful background for the pictures that adorned it. The floor was covered with a carpet of curiously-wrought material that looked like Spanish moss woven in with silken threads. There was a table in one corner upon which were books of

various kinds, and a vase of flowers that diffused their sweet perfume through the room. A beautiful cornucopia hung upon the wall and was filled with fragrant flowers and fruits fresh from the wildwood. Upon a low ottoman near a little window lay a stringed musical instrument.

Fred Travis was dumbfounded. He could scarcely believe the evidences of his own eyes. Whose home was he in? Surely he had been transported to some other realm. No wildwood home could be so comfortable and luxurious as that.

He starts. He hears a soft footstep entering the room. He drops the curtain, and lays back upon the couch. He sees a shadow flit across the curtain. It was the shadow of a woman. Was it an angel?

He had scarcely asked himself the question when the sound of music broke upon his ears, sweet, harmonious and dulcet-like in its strains. Some one was playing upon the instrument he had seen lying upon the ottoman. The air was solemn and slow, and awakened every emotion in the young man's breast. He listened to the music entirely enraptured. Suddenly the clear, sweet voice of a woman entered into the melody with a harmonious accompaniment, and to Fred it seemed as though an angel's voice was pouring out its inspirations in one holy, enchanting strain. He listened for several moments. The music had now descended to one of those low, dying chords which the ear devours so eagerly, and he could no longer resist the desire that tempted his heart. He lifted one corner of the curtain, and gazed, unobserved, upon the sweet, fair face of the young singer, Vida St. Leger.

For fully a minute he feasted his eyes upon her form and face, his very soul entranced, not only by the rapturous melody of her voice, but the loveliness of her features.

At length he sunk back upon his couch, his heart in a tumult of emotions. And now his mind became actively engaged in thought. Somewhere he had seen that fair face before. Was it not in his dreams? He thought long. One by one he recalled the incidents of the past two days.

He started suddenly with a strange shudder. It was the same face as that of the youthful horseman that he and his friends had seen the day before, galloping through the woods in male attire—the same whom Omaha had said was Death-Notch!

But, that such a fair, delicate creature could be so terrible a being as the young Scalp-Hunter, seemed utterly preposterous. But, who was she? Surely not a demon in angel disguise.

At last the music ceased. Then Fred heard her footsteps approaching him.

The curtain was drawn aside, and the eyes of Vida St. Leger met those of her invalid protegee.

She started slightly on seeing his eyes were open, and gazing up into hers with a conscious light; but, quickly recovering from her sudden emotion, she said:

"You are better, I see, young stranger."

Her voice thrilled Fred's heart with renewed strength and hope.

"Indeed, fair maiden," he replied, rising to his elbow, "I knew not until a few minutes ago that I was in existence since I was stricken down in the forest. But, how came I here?"

"Are you strong enough to hear a long story?" Vida questioned.

"Yes," he replied, "I feel strong as ever."

Vida then seated herself near his couch, and narrated to him the terrible position in which she found him; how she had rescued him from the log and carried him home in her canoe, and how, for the remainder of that day and the night that followed, she and her brother had stood over him and labored to rekindle the spark of life that still lingered within his body.

Fred was astounded by her narrative. He knew nothing of the terrible ordeal through which he had passed after he was beaten down on the night of the storm. It was well that he did not.

In the kindest of words he thanked and blessed Vida for her goodness of heart toward him. They talked on—one subject led to another, and finally Vida asked:

"How came you to be beaten down unconscious in the woods? Surely it was not done by an Indian, or he would never have left his work undone, nor taken the trouble to tie you to a log and send you adrift."

"You have heard of Death-Notch, the young Scalp-Hunter, have you not?" Fred asked.

Vida grew pale, and fear seemed to take possession of her.

"Yes," she replied, "I have oftentimes heard of him, and the name fills me with terror."

"It was he that beat me down," said Fred, and he watched the face of the maiden closely.

A little cry burst from her lips.

"Death-Notch is a terrible being," she said. "I have never seen him, but within a stone's throw of our cabin his terrible death-notch is on two or three trees, under which brother Ralph found the lifeless bodies of Indians. I fear him more on brother's account than my own, for he is away so much of the time."

"Is your brother a hunter and trapper?"

"Oh, sir! she exclaimed, as with a sudden pang, "I wish you had never asked me that question."

"I beg a thousand pardons, dear girl," said Fred, apologetically; "you need not answer my question if it is distasteful to you."

"I would like to answer the question if I could," Vida replied sadly, "but my brother's calling is unknown to me. He hunts and traps, it is true, but only sufficient for our sustenance. I am afraid that there is something he is keeping concealed from me. He is away from home most of the time, and when I ask him where he has been, and about his success, he evades both questions. But he is the only friend I have, and I love him with all the fervor of a sister's heart, and I know he loves me. During the eight months we have dwelt here in this secluded spot, you are the first person who has been in our house besides ourselves; and yours is the first white face, besides brother's, that I have seen for months, although the settlement of Stony Cliff is only twenty miles from here. But I am afraid to go there."

"Why so?" asked Fred.

"I love my brother, as I said before. And I have a suspicion of what he follows, and to you I shall confide my suspicions."

"You can do so, dear girl, with perfect safety. Not one word will I breathe to a living soul. I would not—I could not betray the hand that rescued me from death."

"Oh, thank you! thank you!" she cried, joyfully. "It is so nice to have one in whom you can confide; and I hope brother will yet explain away the secret which I feel certain is connected with his absence. My suspicions, however, are that he is one of Pirate Paul's robbers, if he is not Pirate Paul himself."

"What have you upon which to base your opinion, besides his refusing to account for his constant absence from home?" asked Fred.

"I have found letters in his pockets directed to Pirate Paul, but written in cipher. But, hark! I hear a footstep. Brother is coming!" She dropped the curtain and turned aside, while Fred again lay down upon his couch.

Then he heard the door swing open and a footstep cross the threshold. He heard the sister's kind and welcome greeting and a kiss. Then he heard the brother say:

"You are looking both troubled and pleased, my little sister. Why is it? Is not your handsome young patient better?"

Fred did not hear her answer, for that voice froze his blood almost with terror.

It was the voice of Death-Notch, the young Scalp-Hunter!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAGIC RING.

THEY met at their old trysting-place—Ralph St. Leger and Sylveen Gray.

Ralph was looking a little pale and toilworn, while Sylveen's face wore a bright smile and her heart was throbbing wildly under the emotions of anxiety and fear—anxiety to test the power of the ring which Martha Gregory had given her, and a fear that it would prove her handsome boy-lover a prairie pirate, as Scott Shirely had declared him to be.

After their first greeting, Sylveen said:

"You look tired and exhausted, Ralph."

"I am a little tired, dear Sylveen," the youth replied. "I have traveled far this morning."

"Just to meet me, Ralph?" queried the maiden, a tender light beaming in her eyes.

"Yes, sweet Sylveen. To keep my promise with you. I would let nothing detain me, unless it was death."

"You are very true to me, dear Ralph. But, do you never grow tired of your hunter life—of wandering through the forest alone?"

"I cannot say I am entirely alone, Sylveen. Your presence is ever before me to cheer me and give me bright hopes for the future."

Sylveen nestled closer to the manly form of her lover. She could not doubt his honesty of heart. His free, open countenance spoke plainer than words could have done of his innocence. The Hudson Bay Agent must have been mistaken about his being Pirate Paul. The only thing that seemed strange to her about Ralph was in his refusing to go to the settlement to live. But she accounted for this through a boyish bashfulness and reticence, although he appeared like one who had been reared in the company of refined society.

Her greatest fears for him were of Death-Notch, for almost every day came fabulous stories of that terrible being's vengeance. But, then, there is no end to border superstition, and she prayed that those stories might be without any foundation.

They talked on for some time. They talked of their love, and some nonsense, as lovers will; and finally the subject changed to that of the Prairie Pirates, and during its discussion Sylveen watched every expression of her boy-lover's eye and every lineament of his features. But she saw no trace of an evil heart or guilty conscience. Still the power of the ring had not been tested, and, with this end in view, she permitted her little hand to steal slyly into the

hard palm of her lover. He pressed it gently, then raised it to his lips.

The ring caught his eye. He gazed at it for a moment, then an exclamation of surprise burst from his lips.

"Sylveen," he asked, "where did you get that ring? It's hers—my darling, sainted—"

He did not finish the sentence. Sylveen tore herself from his embrace, and while her face grew livid with scorn and indignation, a cry that came from a broken heart welled to her lips.

"Sylveen! Sylveen!" the youth cried, "what is the meaning of all this?"

"Ralph St. Leger!" she almost shrieked, "you have deceived me! You are a robber—a prairie pirate—you are Pirate Paul himself!"

"Sylveen, stay! One word, I implore you! Sylveen! Sylveen!"

But Sylveen was deaf to his entreaties. With a cry that deepened into a sob of anguish, she turned and fled toward the village.

"My God, what is the meaning of all this?" exclaimed Ralph St. Leger, in agony of heart. "Some one is deceiving Sylveen, or else Heaven has forsaken me! Sylveen, oh, my darling Sylveen! this mistake shall be rectified! I swear this! And I dare the vengeance of Stony Cliff itself; and my enemies, whoever they are, shall suffer for this!"

He jerked his rifle to his shoulder, turned and strode away into the woods at a rapid pace.

But scarcely was he lost from view in the depths of the undergrowth when the lithe figure of an Indian glided from a clump of bushes hard by, and stole away directly on the trail of the young hunter.

CHAPTER XV.

RED ELK ON THE WAR-PATH.

THE wildest excitement prevailed within the Indian village when it became known that Death-Notch had been in their midst—in their council-lodge; had stricken down one of their leaders, and then fled on the horse of Le Subtile Fox.

The body of the young chief, Red Antelope, whom those in the council-lodge supposed the terrible Death-Notch to be, was soon brought in. He was scalpless, and bore the death-notch of his slayer.

The fury of the savage band became great. They surged to and fro like maddened beasts. They uttered their fearful war-cries and grappled with imaginary foes.

It was some time before Inkpadueah could restore order and assemble his chiefs in council again. When he did, however, Le Subtile Fox was still among them, feeling thankful that Death-Notch had let him off with no further loss than that of his horse.

The old chief addressed the council with all the eloquence of which he was master. He portrayed in vivid colors the destruction that Death-Notch was visiting upon his people. He invoked their immediate vengeance.

His hearers responded in cries that asserted their readiness for action.

Le Subtile Fox also addressed the assembly in a few pointed remarks that seemed to have more influence upon the savages than the chief's speech. This was probably because the chief had stuck to the truth, while the wily renegade had soared away into eloquent falsehoods, so readily devoured by the Indian warriors.

Le Subtile Fox remained at the village until he had accomplished his mission, and learned the course the Indians intended to pursue; then he took his departure from the place.

The night wore away, and on the following morning several war-parties were dispatched in all directions to assist the party already absent under Sleepy-Eyes in the search for the terrible Death-Notch.

But before night one of the parties returned with the remnant of the young chief's party, and the body of the young chief himself.

From the lips of the warriors the Indians learned of the conflict at the deserted hut where Sleepy-Eyes was slain. They also received a confirmation of Le Subtile Fox's story of a new foe, calling themselves the Eight Avengers, being in the country. And terrible foes they threatened to be, for the affair at the deserted hut was their first blow, and Sleepy-Eyes their first victim.

"War, war to the knife! Vengeance! vengeance!" were the cries that passed from lip to lip of the savage foe; and the following morning a dozen different parties were sent forth in every direction. One under the daring chief, Red Elk, was sent down the river toward Stony Cliff to intercept the Eight Avengers, if possible.

His warriors numbered about a score, and were the flower of the tribe in point of bravery and physical strength. They were painted and plumed, until they appeared hideous, and were armed with the best weapons in all the tribe.

These men took their departure on foot, and after journeying through the forest until they came to the river, they changed their direction and followed the course of the stream.

At a rapid pace they pushed on, and the day was half gone when they observed a canoe coming up the river. There was an Indian in it, and a second glance assured the savages that it

was a scout who had been sent out from the town a day or two previous.

Red Elk's party at once made their presence known, and soon the scout was in their midst.

"What news does Creeping-Vine bring from the camp of our enemies?" asked Red Elk.

"The pale-face enemies are abroad. They are called Avengers, and are led by a dog of an Omaha. Death-Notch still prowls through the woods for the scalps of the Dacotah and Sioux."

"Has Creeping-Vine seen the pale-faces under the Omaha?"

"He has; and has heard them talk. He lay hid under some old leaves when they broke camp. They are now searching for a friend whom they lost on the night of the storm. They fear Death-Notch struck their friend down."

"Then Death-Notch strikes down the pale-faces, too?"

"Yes."

"Where now are those calling themselves The Eight Avengers?"

"On the march. To-night they will encamp on the Hunter's Island, below Eagle Rock."

"How does Creeping-Vine know this?"

"The pale-face lays out his plans and marks out his course before he starts. I heard the Avengers say where they would encamp to-night, before they left the camp this morning."

"Then," said Red Elk, a glow of triumph beaming from his sunken eyes, "before another sun rises to herald of the Avengers' final hour at the river, I will lead my warriors. We will enter the forest, the pale-faces entrap the beaver."

When the wily chief had thus expressed himself, he moved on down the stream toward Hunter's Island, followed by his warriors.

CHAPTER XVI.

OLD LEAD-AWAY.

JUST at daybreak a little party of seven persons broke camp in the forest north of Stony Cliff, and headed their way up the river.

It was the Spirit Lake Avengers, now led by the friendly Omaha. Those wounded at the deserted hut had so far recovered as to be able to set forward on their journey again. They had been kindly treated while at Stony Cliff, and had received urgent invitations to remain; but the unknown fate of Fred Travis proved a keen spur to their anxiety and impatience, and they at once set out in search of him.

They had already hunted the forest through in the vicinity of the deserted hut, and as they could find no trace of him, they thought he might have been taken captive by the Indians and carried away to their village. If so, they hoped to be in time to save him.

The Omaha being well acquainted with the topography of the country through which they were journeying, they moved with expedition.

At a distance of a good day's travel from where they broke camp, there was an island in the river, which they aimed to reach ere sunset. But in this they were disappointed. It was dark when a point opposite the island was reached. And now they met with another obstacle between them and the island. For the want of a canoe some hours would be consumed in constructing a raft. But it was their only recourse. Searching along the bank for drift-logs, they were so fortunate as to find a raft, already constructed, lying lodged against the river bank.

It showed signs of having been recently made! A number of old, dry logs had been placed parallel with each other, and in this manner lashed together with green barks and withes. The logs were very large—some of them three feet in diameter. Half of this thickness was submerged in the water.

At first, Omaha thought there might be something tricky about the raft, but a careful examination set aside all his fears. As the raft was not made fast, they supposed it had been floated there by the late flood from some point above.

Boarding the rude affair, the Avengers towed it out into the middle of the river, then permitted it to drop down, at the will of the current, against the upper side of the island, where it could not be drifted away.

The island was a small tract of sandy soil, covered with a dense growth of willows. It was elevated several feet above the highest water mark. In the center was a bare spot of sand, and in the center of this was a wide, flat stone covered with the ashes of a recent camp-fire.

The island was a favorite camping-place of the hunter, trapper, Indian, or whoever happened to be journeying in these parts, on account of the natural advantages offered as a protection against the sudden surprise of an enemy; and, at the date of our story, it was known as Hunter's Island.

As the Avengers did not deem it safe to strike a fire, they ate their supper from the remnants of their morning meal. When the repast was over, Omaha made a careful circuit of the island.

"You think, then, an enemy could not surprise us here?" asked Meredith, when the Friendly reappeared.

"No; if an Indian, or any one, can get onto the island without me seeing him before he gets

here, then Omaha will give up that he is a better scout, and—"

"Then, laddy, I guess ye'll have to knock under to yer granddaddy."

The Avengers started to their feet, with sudden surprise and blank astonishment written upon their faces. The last voice was that of a stranger who had appeared in their midst as silently as though he had been dropped from the clouds.

He was a tall, lean, lank individual, of, perhaps, some forty years of age, dressed in a suit of greasy buck-skin. His head was surmounted by a coon-skin cap, from which the hair was worn off, and which appeared like a bald poll. His face was angular and cadaverous; his nose prominent and slightly Roman, and his gray eyes small, yet glittering like two coals of fire beneath their shaggy brows. His free, careless and reckless air was suggestive of one of the old type of brave, jovial old trappers of the Northwest.

He carried a fine-looking rifle, a side tomahawk, a knife and a brace of pistols, and as he appeared before the band of Avengers, he dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and, clasping his hands over the muzzle, assumed an easy, reclining attitude.

For a moment our young friends gazed upon this odd specimen of humanity in silent wonder, and before either of them could speak, he asked:

"Ain't I a stunner, though?"

"I must admit you are," replied Amos Meredith, confusedly; "but who are you, anyhow?"

"Wal, I can't say for sertain, as to that," replied the stranger, with a comical smile; "but I guess I'm a rantankerous ole cuss that's been rippin' over this little patch o' yearth called Nor' America for somethin' nigh on to forty-five years. I'm a lad o' leisure and pleasure; hunt a little, trap a little, and spice the hull now and then with an Ingin skulp. I've no weemin-folks to cry arter me—oh no—nor wash me duds. I generally wear a suit till they git dirty; then I throw myself into the river and flummix erbout awhile, and come out clean as a new-polished rifle. But, as to my name, if we should continoo to sojourn together, call me enny thing, so ye call me in time for a leg o' turkey or a hump o' venison. Over on the Platte they called me Lanky Joe; down on the 'Big Muddy' they called me Dagger-Eyes and Rattlepate; and up on the Republican Fork they call me Ole Shader."

"A very suggestive name, considering not only your anatomy, but the silence with which you appeared among us," said Frank Harriott.

"And faith, ould feller, let mees ax if there are enny ave yees to make a shader?" said Phelix O'Ray.

"Wal, now, youngster with the hoggy tongue, do ye s'pose yer goin' to have a laugh at my expense? If so, all hunky. I like sport like a tortle does sunshine, and I know you're a jolly set. But I'm just such an old scalp-pole as nature made me, and it's durned doubtful whether I'd make a shader, or even a grease-spot, if I was rubbed out. But I'm wiry as an ole black-snake; and what Ole Shader's eyes can't see ain't with lookin' arter."

As he spoke, the old hunter glanced warily toward the upper side of the island quite frequently. This apparent uneasiness did not escape the notice of the young men, and, despite his oddity and bolsterous voice, they apprehended that all was not right. But before either of them could make any remark or inquiry, the old fellow's tongue set off again:

"I reckon as what ye young cubs think I'm a noisy ole rattlepate; but, the fact o' 't is, it's second nature to me to keep blabbin' and clatterin' away like an ole woman or a blue jay. But, then, that's policy in tongue-talk sometimes. Specially in the present case."

"What do you mean?" asked young Meredith. "I see there is an undercurrent in your conversation."

"Wal, now, that's what I've been drivin' at," said Old Shader; "and now"—and his voice fell almost to a whisper—"if ye lads don't want to lose yer scalps, ye've got to git out o' this quick as wink yer eye."

The Avengers started.

"Are there Indians about?" one of them asked.

"Bet yer hair on't. So close that one big leap will bring twenty tomahawks onto yer noggins."

"You're surely jesting!" exclaimed Dick Carter.

"Not a bit o' it. But ye can do jist as ye please, boys; but Ole Shader leaves instanter. Too hot 'round here fur me—too much brimstone."

"I can't see where a foe could possibly be concealed so close to us," said Frank Harriott. "But if there are Indians about, we had better take to the raft and go ashore."

"Thar's no need o' packin' the red devils with ye, so jist let that raft alone. The three big logs in the center o' it are holler, and on the major side o' them are a dozen holes, chopped there with tomahawks, and in every hole there is an Ingin's head and neck run up into the holler."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Harriott; "is it possible?"

"Verily I say unto ye, it is the case. I see'd 'em make the raft, and heard 'em talk 'bout it, and all what it war fur. They know'd ye were comin', and intended to stop on Hunter's Island. A red varlet they called Creepin'-Vine brought 'em the news. Creepin'-Vine overheard you fellers say whar you intended to stop, and I hearn the durned pups settin' their traps to catch ye. They left Creepin'-Vine over on shore to give the signal fur the attack to begin, in case ye war unkeerful enough, as the reds supposed ye would be, to pack 'em over here in that raft. But Creepin'-Vine will never give that signal."

As he concluded, the old hunter tapped his girdle in a significant manner. The scalp of Creepin'-Vine was dangling there!

"Now," he continued, "thar's my canoe. Take it and run yerselfs over to the east shore, then one o' ye bring it back arter me. I'll stay and talk away here like a rip and blazes, and make the dodrotted knaves think yer all sot up with the extract o' sod corn."

"Hadn't one of us better remain with you?" asked Meredith; you might get into trouble."

"Never mind me, boys. I'm ole greased lightnin' on a run or swim, and if I wunce git started thar's no bullet or arrer as can catch me. So git, boys, and go easy as a shader."

The young men took up their rifles, and crossing the island to the lower side, entered the old hunter's canoe, while the hunter himself sat down and began singing the old familiar border song that ran thus:

"The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,"

At the ole hedgehog, at the ole hedgehog;

The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,

'Way down by the Squantum river," etc.

"He's an odd genius," said Frank Harriott, as they pushed out into the river, and permitted the canoe to drop silently down-stream.

In a few moments they had effected a safe and noiseless landing on the east bank of the river. Then Omaha returned with the canoe, and brought Old Shadow over from the island.

"Yah! haw! haw!" laughed the old hunter, "it's a good 'un on 'em pizen varlets, by cracky it is! And now I'll give the signal that Creepin'-Vine, the former owner o' this 'ere scalp, war to give. A—yil! a—yil!"

As the last two cries echoed through the woods, every eye was fixed upon the raft that lay plainly revealed by the moonlight. Instantly there was heard a fluttering in the water, then a score of dark forms were seen to rise from the stream around the raft, and leap onto the island with a yell that resounded for miles and miles.

Across the island they swept, their uplifted tomahawks gleaming in the moonlight. But their triumph was soon turned to disappointment and rage, for they found their enemy was gone—the birds had flown.

Old Shadow chuckled with suppressed laughter, and rubbed his horny palms with glee, and for awhile it seemed as though he would be unable to restrain his emotions.

CHAPTER XVII.

A VOICE FROM THE FLAMES.

THE deep-laid plan for the surprise and massacre of the Lake Avengers, by Red Elk and his warriors, proved a decided failure, and when he found his enemies had escaped, his savage fury knew no bounds.

To have attempted to follow the whites then would have been an act of folly in violation of an Indian's usual precaution. He suspected the Avengers had not only outwitted them, but had laid a trap for their destruction. So he resolved to stay on the island till morning, then take up the trail of the enemy, and follow. So guards were posted on each side of the island, the one that stood on the upper side taking his position on the raft.

Owing to the circular form of the island, and the willows upon it, the guards were unable to see each other from their posts; neither could they be seen by their friends from the center of the island.

Red Elk being beyond rifle range of either shore, order a fire lighted. He wished to hold a consultation with his warriors, and wanted a light by which to read the expression of each one's face, and note the impression that his eloquence would have upon them. So, in obedience to his desire, a fire was built upon the large, flat stone in the center of the little sand opening.

Some of the warriors now filled the bowls on the heel of their tomahawks with tobacco, and began to smoke, while others threw themselves in listless, lounging attitudes upon the sand.

Half an hour passed in silence, then Red Elk spoke. Every warrior rose to a sitting posture and assumed an attentive air.

"Braves of the great Sioux, and followers of Red Elk," the chief began, with all the dignity and eloquence that he could master, but at this juncture there was heard a low groan at the upper side of the island, followed by two dull, wooden blows, and the oration came to an abrupt termination.

Grasping his tomahawk, every warrior glided away in the direction from whence the sound had come, but when the upper side of the island was reached, all was silent as the grave. Upon the raft, however, a fearful sight met their eyes. The guard was hanging, head downward, over the edge of the raft, dead. His head was scalpless, and across his cheek was a deep gash. By his side a fresh notch was cut on one of the logs!

It was the token of Death-Notch, the young Scalp-Hunter.

A yell of terror burst from the red-skins' lips. They leaped upon the raft and began searching it over for the terrible foe. But, to their surprise, the logs parted and began floating away, compelling them to beat a hasty retreat back to the island. The withes that bound the logs together had been cut asunder by the young Scalp-Hunter, with the intention, no doubt, of destroying their chance of escape from the island, without taking to the water.

The doubly defeated savages had not a doubt but that Death-Notch had made good his escape from the island; nevertheless, they made a hasty search for him, but in vain.

Stung to fury, they gathered around their camp-fire again. New fuel was added to the flames. The light leaped out in strong, red beams, and fell with a lurid glow across the grim, demoniac faces of the savages.

Red Elk was the sole embodiment of rage. His expedition, that at first promised so fruitful, was proving a wretched failure. He addressed his warriors in a fierce eloquence, every word of which added new fuel to the fire of their revengeful hearts. It was some time before the storm subsided. Then, with malignant scowls, they all bent their eyes upon the fire, as if actuated by a single impulse.

Then they start. A low groan issues from the very depths of the crackling flame. It is human, and seems to jar the fire, for a million sparks went upward from its bosom, as though a stone had been dropped into its center.

Appalled, the savages start back. Another groan issues from the fire. A column of sparks float upward, wavering and crackling in the currents of air.

The savages start to their feet—recoil.

"It is well, fiends," shrieks a hollow, ghost-like voice.

The burning fagots leap and dance in the fire. The flame waves and splutters spitefully. Sparks, millions of sparks, float upward.

The red-skins stand aghast. A spirit was within the fire. It spoke, and crackling flames and snapping sparks were breathed forth.

The red warriors grow bolder. They now advance closer to the fire and begin circling around it, gazing with starting eyes into the flame. They see nothing. Mysterious terror fills their hearts.

"Red-skins, why do you stare at me?" the voice came from the fire. "I am the spirit that will consume you when Death-Notch has hung your scalps at his girdle. I am angry. I tremble."

The fagots began to leap and quiver on the stone. The flame wavers and the light flickers and flashes. Smoke and sparks float upward.

The savages stand paralyzed with terror. Red Elk has no power of eloquence to break that fearful spell, for he, too, is rooted to the spot with mysterious awe.

At length there is a calm. The flame gathers strength, and the light flares out on the painted, terrified faces around it.

A minute passed.

Again the sparks begin to rise from the fire, and the flame to quiver. The spirit was moving within it. Then there was a sudden crash, and the air was filled with flying firebrands, red-hot coals and hissing sparks. In every direction had the camp-fire been hurled, right and left, into the very faces of the red-skins; then all was darkness.

The savages took to the river, and swimming ashore, fled away into the forest with absolute terror.

Half an hour later a human figure stood in the center of the island. Over the face was an iron mask.

It was Death-Notch, the young Scalp-Hunter! At his feet, leading down under the island, was the small mouth of a cavern. The wide, flat stone, upon which the savages had built their camp-fire, concealed the opening from their view.

There, in the cavern under the stone, had Death-Notch been concealed—having entered the cave through a small opening under the edge of the island, where it had escaped the savages' eyes; and there, under the flat stone, had the young Scalp-Hunter worked upon their fears in the manner we have already shown.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNWILLING EAVESDROPPER.

FRED TRAVIS lay like one under a terrible fascination. That voice fell upon his ear like the voice of doom. There was no mistaking it. It was the voice of Death-Notch, the terror of the red-skin and the fear of the settler. He spoke in that even, natural tone that he had used when he had first made himself known

after the conflict at the deserted hut. But then young Travis could not drive from memory's ear those wild, hoarse notes of the madman, when he—Death-Notch—begged him to flee from him in the woods.

Would not Fred's face excite him again, and throw him into that fearful state of uncontrollable madness? The thought was anything but pleasant to Fred, and he began to think of escaping from the cabin. But this he found would be impossible. The cabin had but one door, and near this the brother and sister stood.

The youth bent his ear and listened. He heard them talking, and learned that he himself was the subject of their conversation.

"Yes, Ralph, he is better," he heard Vida say; "he has entirely recovered consciousness, and thinks he is well as ever. But he is weak, and must not be disturbed."

"No, no, Vida," he heard the brother respond; "he is your patient; you have saved his life so far, and your injunctions must be strictly regarded."

"Oh, Ralph!" and Vida's eyes grew bright with some inward emotion; but, suddenly remembering that Fred was awake, she checked the words that came to her lips, while the dark, silk eyelashes drooped shyly on her flushed cheeks.

"What is it, Vida?" asked Ralph St. Leger. "You are feeling unusually joyous; have you caught it from the young stranger?"

"Sh, Ralph!" she said, placing the tips of her tapering, dimpled fingers to her brother's lips; "he is awake and may hear you. Come, sit down. You look tired and careworn. You must be hungry."

Ralph St. Leger threw himself upon the ottoman, while Vida stole softly back to Fred's couch, and, drawing aside the curtain, gazed down upon the youth. He slept.

She moved lightly away, and was soon engaged in the preparation of the evening meal. When it was ready, Fred was still asleep. She would not disturb his slumber. She would take him food when he awoke.

Ralph eat his supper silently and thoughtfully. Vida watched him closely. She saw at once that something uncommon rested upon his mind; and after supper was over, and the table cleared away, the brother and sister seated themselves near the door, furthest from the invalid's couch, and entered into conversation.

"Ralph, dear," said Vida, "you are in trouble. Your very looks and actions say so. Why is it?"

"Vida, my love was spurned to-day by one whom I loved most dearly."

"You loved, Ralph? This is news to me. You surprise me."

"Yes, no doubt, sister. But there is a maiden at Stony Cliff whom I met and loved many days ago. And to me she pledged her heart and hand, but to-day she revoked that pledge and spurned my love. She accused me of being Pirate Paul."

Vida started and uttered a little cry.

"Brother," she said, "I have even thought so myself."

"My God!" he exclaimed; "is it possible that you link my name with that of a villain, Vida?"

"How can I do otherwise, brother? For nearly a year have we lived in this secluded spot. Your comings and goings have been wrapped in mystery to me. You tell me nothing, unless it is of the terrible deeds of Death-Notch, or of some robbery committed by the prairie pirates. Why have you been so silent, if you did not wish me to couple your absence with that of some evil?"

Fred Travis has heard every word. He did not approve of eavesdropping, but there was a mystery about this brother and sister that he wished to solve. To Vida he saw her brother's doings were entirely unknown. He had caught a glimpse of Ralph's face through the curtain. He saw the resemblance it bore to the maiden's. He was fully satisfied that he was Death-Notch, for, although the Scalp-Hunter had kept his face masked at the hut, his voice was the same as that of Ralph St. Leger. But might not he be the Pirate Paul, too?

"Sister," said Ralph, after awhile, "half of my life is a blank. Ever since our parents were slain by the accursed Sioux, under Le Subtile Fox—since I witnessed the torture and shameful treatment of our mother and sister—I have been insane half of my time. And were it not for you, Vida, to soften my heart, to live for, to love, I believe I would go entirely mad. And since Sylveen Gray—she whom I have loved with all the affection of a true heart—has spurned my love, it seems as though this life of mine is a bitter one. But, sister, do you remember the ring that mother wore ere our home fell under the savages' blows?"

"Yes, yes, Ralph. I could never forget it. It was a gold ring, with such a curious setting of some precious stone. But what of it?"

"Sylveen Gray wears that ring."

A cry burst from Vida's lips.

"It must have been taken from mother after her capture," she said; "but how came Miss Gray in possession of it?"

"I know not. But when I saw and recognized it, Sylveen shrunk from me as if from an adder."

at the same time accusing me of being Pirate Paul. There is some mystery connected with that ring."

"There must be; but, tell me, Ralph, why it is, if you are not a robber, that you tell me so little of your hunting excursions?"

"Vida, are you sure your patient is asleep?"

The maiden arose, and going to Fred's couch, drew aside the curtain.

"Yes, he still sleeps soundly," she said, stealing back to her brother's side on tip-toe.

"Then I will tell you something, sister," Ralph said. "Revenge is what leads me from home, and keeps me away. Upon those who slew our father and tortured to death our mother and sister have I sworn to wreak a terrible revenge. Heaven seems to justify me in my course. I can excite myself to madness by thinking over our friends' suffering and shame, and when I am mad this world is almost a blank to me. I do most terrible acts. The sight of one of those savages who destroyed our home crazes my brain. I can not control my anger. A demon's power and fury are infused into my body. I am vaguely conscious of all I do, yet can not restrain my acts, and there is nothing that I dare not do. It is not insanity that crazes my brain, but a spirit of revenge. It is a singular and terrible state into which I am thrown, but I can not help it. It comes like a dream in my sleep, and my acts are all involuntary. I have no control over myself; but, God seems to guide and protect me while laboring under those terrible attacks. But one thought of you, sister, or of my adored Sylveen, would drive the spell away. It is curious—nay, mysterious—what freaks and fills the human race is addicted to. The sight of a strange white face sometimes throws me into that awful state of madness. It will bring up old memories of days gone by, when we were so happy and joyous with a father and mother. Then will rise the demon faces of their murderers, and my spirit maddens for revenge. And, Vida, I hear much of Death-Notch, and his terrible deeds of vengeance on the red-skins. Time and again, sister, have I recovered from one of my terrible fits to find a scalp at my girdle. By thinking, as you would over a dream, I can recall a vague remembrance of how it came there. But to make a long story short, it is Death-Notch, the young Scalp-Hunter, as the Indians have seen fit to name me."

A low, half-suppressed cry burst from Vida's lips, and an expression of fear overshadowed her features. Ralph's revelations had startled her. From his own story she at once believed he was subject to attacks of fits, and yet he had endeavored to make her believe it was but excitement. She felt no uneasiness for herself, but for the handsome, invalid youth lying behind the curtain. What if her brother should become mad at sight of him? As she asked herself the question, she glanced uneasily and involuntarily toward the curtain. Ralph readily divined her thoughts and fears by her actions, and continued, assuringly:

"You need have no fears for him, Vida. I see your heart has become deeply interested in that youth's welfare."

"Oh, Ralph!" she cried, blushing crimson, "it shocks me to think of Death-Notch—that you are that terrible being!"

"I have kept the fact from you for your own good. I know it is an appalling mood that at times possesses me."

"Yes, brother, and I fear it will be the death of you yet," said Vida.

"God holds our lives in his hands. I am his servant, and as he wills I am satisfied. But, Vida, I have settled my mind upon one thing. I must see Sylveen Gray once more. I must bring about a reconciliation, if possible. Without her love, sister, this world will be a half-blank to me. If she will listen to my story, believe that I am no Pirate Paul, and will renew her promise to wed me some day, then will I leave this wild, secluded home, wherein love as well as revenge is keeping me. Once away from the hateful presence of the Indians, I know this spirit of revenge will be forgotten. But I hardly know how to act now."

"Ralph, I wish I could advise you in your trouble. But, for the sake of your sister, be careful of your life. When you are gone, I will have no one to care for me."

Tears gathered in the eyes of Ralph St. Leger. He drew his little sister toward him, put back the long, dark ringlets from her brow, and planted a kiss upon it.

In the mean time, Fred Travis was an attentive listener to the startling revelations of Ralph St. Leger, and the words of tenderness spoken by the brother and sister. He felt ashamed of his silence, but he could not help it.

After a few moments' silence he heard the brother and sister renew their conversation.

"Brother," said Vida, "I believe now you are not Pirate Paul, but I cannot say I am pleased to know you are Death-Notch."

"I am not pleased over the fact myself, Vida, but then I feel that I have not been accountable, in a certain sense, for many things that I have done. But, revenge now is only a secondary object. Love stands pre-eminent—a love that grew strong ere Death-Notch struck his first blow, and made his name a terror. However,

if Sylveen Gray will hear my story, and believe me—renew her promise to become my wife when we have grown older, then will I give up this life."

"Oh, I pray, then, that she will!" cried Vida, hopefully; "but, Ralph, you say when you are under these mysterious attacks, you have a faint remembrance of what you do, yet can not stay your acts."

"Yes, such is the case."

"Then, do you remember of having beat this young man down in the forest on the night of the storm?"

"No, Vida, for I did not."

"He says Death-Notch beat him down."

"He is mistaken. I was with him that night, and had one of my attacks. I knew it was coming, and warned him to flee and join his friends. He left me, and I recovered. Soon after I saw three persons, who I concluded were robbers, and still a few minutes later I heard a pistol-shot. I never saw Fred Travis after our parting there that night, until I saw him lying unconscious in your canoe."

Fred heard this declaration with a feeling of joy. A terrible weight was lifted from his heart. He would now have nothing to fear from Death-Notch.

By this time it was dark in the cabin; so a lamp was lighted. Ralph and his little sister now sought Fred's couch, and finding he had, apparently, just awakened, Vida went to prepare him some food, while her brother engaged him in conversation, by which Fred soon learned that the young Scalp-Hunter was a person of more than ordinary intelligence.

Vida's appearance with some food on a snowy plate, and a bowl of coffee, ended their talk. Fred arose from his couch, and, being seated in an easy-chair, ate the viands brought him with a keen relish. After this repast he felt much refreshed and strengthened, and ventured on a few minutes' walk and exercise in the open air. When he returned, Ralph also was out, but came in, in a few minutes, looking not a little excited.

The three seated themselves and entered into conversation. Fred sat with his back toward the open door and facing Ralph, and Vida sat at one side.

Suddenly, Fred saw Ralph start as though he had detected a slight, unnatural sound without, for he fixed his eyes upon the open door.

"What is it, Ralph?" asked Fred.

Ralph made no reply. Fred gazed into his face and saw it was set with the rigidity of death. His white, pearly teeth shone between his slightly parted lips, and his eyes glowed and scintillated like coals of fire; their pupils dilated until they seemed to cover the whole ball. It was a terrible expression, not one of madness, nor insanity either, but of—what? Who can tell?

"Ralph! Ralph!" exclaimed Fred, hoping to break the spell that was coming over him like a serpent's fascination.

Ralph made no reply, but, like an arrow, he shot through the cabin door, out into the blinding darkness.

Before either Fred or Vida could speak, there was heard a low, wail-like cry; then all became silent again.

A minute later Ralph made his appearance in the door, apparently as calm and composed as he had ever been.

But Vida sprung backward with a shriek, and pointing to his girdle, exclaimed:

"My God, Ralph, what is that?"

CHAPTER XIX.

EVIL FACES.

RALPH ST. LEGER started at his sister's words, as though he had suddenly been aroused from a dream. He gazed down at his girdle, where he beheld a reeking scalp dangling. With apparent disgust, he tore the bloody trophy from his side and tossed it out of the door.

"The cunning fiend," said Death-Notch, "got a little too close. I remember seeing him pass the door and peer in when I sat there."

"Brother," said Vida, with trembling voice, "I'm so afraid our home will be discovered by the savages and we slain, for they must be continually on the hunt for Death-Notch. Oh, Ralph! let us leave here soon!"

"Your wish shall be granted, Vida; a few more days and we will forever leave this wilderness and its dangers, God willing. But, for fear there may now be other savages about, I will go out and reconnoiter."

Vida would have protested against his leaving, but, before she could speak, he had taken his weapon and left the cabin.

The maiden and her invalid guest waited long and anxiously for his return, but the hours stole away, the moon sunk behind the western tree-tops, and dawn appeared in the east before he returned.

When he did his face wore a look of fatigue. It was evident that he had spent the night in activity.

"Brother, you have been gone so very long!" said Vida; "are the Indians about?"

"The woods are swarming with them, and I am afraid they'll find our home, alas, too soon! But I must keep on the alert."

And so he did. During the next two days he was absent from home most of his time—scouting through the woods.

Fred Travis convalesced rapidly, within the sunshine of Vida's smiles. He walked with her in the cool, silvan wood; rowed with her upon the creek, and talked and sung with her until the emotions that were ripening in their young hearts gushed forth in confessions of love and joy.

From the moment they had first gazed into each other's eyes, a feeling far deeper than mere friendship was awakened in each young heart. This continued to grow upon them, until it at last found expression in words of love and devotion.

To these lovers that solitary cabin seemed an Arcadian bower. They thought but little of the dangers that so troubled the mind of Death-Notch and kept him on constant watch. There was no vain show nor formality in their love. It was a pure and holy love in which the noblest emotions of the human breast held power.

It was near the close of the third day of Fred's sojourn at the Lone Cabin—as Vida called the place—that the young lovers were seated upon the bank of the little stream which formed the western boundary of the glade.

They had long expected the return of Death-Notch, and Vida had begun to chafe in spirit at his protracted absence. But Fred spoke words of cheer to her and endeavored to comfort her mind and keep it upon something else. In her lap lay a Spanish guitar, upon which she had been playing for him, and now, as the twilight shadows began to gather over the woodland with their evening voices and solemn inspirations, Fred asked her to play again.

The maiden took up the instrument and struck a sweet, inspiring air, her own rich voice joining in the melody in a clear, rippling cadence. The music was delicious, and the beautiful singer modified the tones of her own voice and that of the instrument to harmonize with the soft, vibrant air that carried the sounds away through the forest aisles in strains of ravishing sweetness.

The air was a familiar one to Fred, but he had never heard it sung with such inspiring melody. It brought up recollections of a once-happy home and dear faces that were now no more. Tears welled up into his eyes, as his thoughts went back over old, sweet memories.

The snowy fingers of the forest beauty flashed over the strings of the instrument unnoticed by him. But, as her voice rose and fell in those sweet, melodious strains, his breast rose and fell with the emotions it stirred within.

At length the music grew slower and fainter, and finally faded away in silence in a low, dying chord.

Fred raised his eyes to those of the lovely girl. He saw she was sitting motionless as a carved image, her lips slightly parted, and her face set with an expression of terror. The guitar was in her hands, and her fingers upon the strings; but it was mute.

Vida's eyes were fixed with a terrified gaze upon the opposite side of the creek, and Fred permitted his own eyes to turn in that direction, and to his horror he saw the dark green foliage parted in a dozen places, and the grim, painted face of an Indian warrior appeared in each opening.

CHAPTER XX.

A TURKEY-HUNT.

"HULLO, lads! Git outen this! The sun's up and shinin' it over the hill like sixty, and has been for an hour. Time for snoozin' up, and we must be scratchin' gravel for new diggin's, and—"

"The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog, At the ole hedgehog, at the ole hedgehog; The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog, 'Way down by the Squantum river," etc.

Thus spoke and sung Old Shadow, as he made his appearance in the midst of a number of forms that lay stretched in slumber beneath the arching boughs of the surrounding trees.

It was morning, and the rising sun had just gilded the tops of the forest trees. The old trapper had been on guard, and as daylight had relieved him from duty, he made his appearance in camp before any of his companions had awakened.

In a few minutes the avengers were on foot, moving about to exercise their cramped limbs and to drink in the fresh morning air.

"Wal, I hope you feel as fresh as a new cut," said the old scout; "but it makes the blood leap in my ole carcass when I think how nigh ye come gittin' yer poles shaved by them are red, whoopin', thievin' varlets."

"Well, I should judge we all felt considerably refreshed and rested," said Amos Meredith, "but I suppose you feel none the better for your night of vigilance."

"Ho, the dickens!" exclaimed the scout; "I feel as fresh as a young bar arter a night's raid in a pig-pen. Why, bless ye, it's nuthin' for Ole Shader to rampage around all day and night too. I'm a tough ole cuss. But thar's one thing sartin: I'm beginnin' to feel as holler as a dried pokeberry stalk. I haven't had any nutriment fur the stummick fur two full days. And

it strikes me just under the skulp that a roasted turkey wouldn't go bad, or a hump o' rich, juicy venison, if turkey warn't on the bill o' fare. What say ye, larks?"

"We have to depend on our rifles for food," said one of the Avengers, "and we can't work without it."

"That's the right cackle," replied the old hunter, "so I'll go out and snatch in an old gobbler, or a lump o' venison, and you 'uns can strike a fire to knock the stiffness outen it."

"Perhaps one of us had better accompany you?" said young Harriott.

"Oh, the deuce, no," replied the hunter, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and strolling off into the woods, humming to himself "the old hedgehog."

Old Shadow was a true type of the woods, a born Indian-fighter and hunter. He had one fault, however; he was never still, but where others seemed to succeed by silence and precaution, he seemed to excel by his recklessness and careless habits, or, in other words, mere accident.

After leaving the Avengers, he pushed on quite rapidly a mile or more from camp before he began looking for signs of game. At length he came to a little creek whose shores he carefully examined. He saw turkey tracks in abundance where they had gone down to the water's edge to drink.

Seating himself under cover of some bushes where he could command a fair view of the surrounding, he took from his pocket a small, hollow bone which he placed to his lips and produced a succession of sounds in exact imitation of the hen-turkey's call. Then he listened, but heard nothing. He repeated the call, and, almost instantly, there came to his ears the far-off gobble, gobble of a turkey.

But the old hunter shook his head doubtfully, and after a moment had elapsed he uttered the call again.

Again he was answered.

"Durn my ole riggin'," he exclaimed to himself; "that's not ginuwine, or my hearin' and experience don't amount to shucks. No, siree, bob-tail, that's not a turkey's gobble. It's a blasted red-skin's gabble, and it's hard tellin' what the lopin' varlet is arter. He may be tryin' to git me into trubble, and he may take my call for the ginuwine article. I'll try it ag'in."

He repeated his call. It was answered immediately, and the sound seemed to be nearer than before.

"No, it's not a turkey's answer," he mused; so far as the imitation's concerned, it'll do, but if my head's level thar's too long an interval between each gobble. If it's a red he's coming up the creek, and I propose to set him up, if he comes nosin' round me; fur I'm hungry as a buzzart, and when I'm hungry Old Shader knows his temper isn't assweet and mild as an angel's—oh, no—and the possum he grinned—but, see here, old fool, keep still if ye want Ingin h'ar."

The old hunter having thus enjoined silence upon himself, stole from his covert, crept down to the water's brink where he carefully ensconced himself upon some drooping foliage. Here he awaited the transpiration of events.

The sound of footsteps in the water soon caught his practiced ears. He glanced down the stream and saw a savage wading up the creek. He was stepping with all the caution he could muster, with eyes and ears on the alert.

Old Shadow chuckled and rubbed his hands with glee in anticipation of a fight with an Indian, which he relished more keenly than a leg of roasted turkey.

The cunning savage came on, but the old hunter could form no idea what he meant by his stealthy movements. He was surely not trying to steal upon a turkey.

"No, siree!" Old Shadow suddenly exclaimed to himself; "the varlet means deviltry. I can see it in his snaky eye—he's arter scalps—ah!"

Just at this juncture the red-skin stopped within three steps of him, and craning his neck, uttered the shrill gobble of the male turkey.

"Now fur the tug," thought Old Shadow, and he at once gave utterance to the "cluck, cluck, cluck" of the hen turkey.

Then he saw the savage turn, and parting the foliage, peered into his very face.

"Mornin', Mister Red-skin," was the cool, laconic salutation of the old hunter.

The Indian uttered an indignant "Ugh!" and grasped his tomahawk, but, before he could draw it, Old Shadow's long, muscular arm shot out from his shoulder and his bony fist was planted between the red-skin's eyes. Like a leaden weight, the savage fell full length in the water.

Before he could regain his feet, the old hunter followed up the advantage already gained by seizing his adversary by the scalp-lock and "ducking" his head under water.

Although he was partly stunned by the blow that felled him, the savage made a desperate effort to regain his feet. In point of strength he was more than a match for the old hunter, but, the latter's wiry suppleness more than neutralized this advantage.

The struggle waxed warm for several min-

utes, both combatants kicking, striking and floundering about until they were completely enveloped in a shower of flying water and spray. They fought in silence, neither showing a fear of the other by uttering a sound that could be heard fifty yards away.

The strength of the savage, however, soon began to grow feeble. This Old Shadow noticed more readily than the savage did himself. The old hunter had managed to keep the upper side, and the red-skin's head under water most of the time. Strangulation was telling fast upon the warrior. No weapons were used. Although the old hunter had plenty of chances to do so, he wished to test his physical powers in conflict with a savage, who, he saw, possessed not only the advantage of size, but age—he being in the very prime of manhood.

And the savage seeing the inferiority of his foe's long, lank form and wrinkled face, would show no humiliation to him, though he were in his death-throes, by begging for mercy or calling for help, even were it near. Such is the pride of an Indian's spirit.

This struggle lasted but a few moments longer. Victory crowned the old hunter. The savage ceased to struggle, his muscles relaxed, and he sunk down, limp and lifeless, at the scout's feet in the water.

"Thar now, whew!" ejaculated the hunter, with an air of relief; "durn yer lop-sided mug, I guess ye won't go gobblin' round these diggin's soon ag'in, disturbin' of one's prospect for a square meal. By flunky! if I'd had a fair breakfast o' juicy venison to leant ag'in, I'd busted yer snoot the fust dip I give ye, ye red, rovin' varlet. Guess I won't dirty my knife with yer filthy skulp—leave it for the buzzards to do, and—"

The possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog, At the ole—

But, see here, Ole Shader, thar's danger o' makin' a fool o' yerself, and if yer want a turkey, let that eternal, everlastin' ole hedgehog alone."

Thus chastising himself, Old Shadow waded from the stream, and procuring his rifle, proceeded a short distance down the creek. Here he again concealed himself near the water's edge, and producing his bone, began calling for turkeys.

A "genuine gobble" was soon the result of his calls; and presently a large, fine gobbler, with arched neck, inflated wattles and trailing wings, came strutting proudly, yet cautiously, into view from the woods on the opposite side of the creek.

It stopped within easy gunshot of Old Shadow, and the next instant his rifle had cracked, and the deceived bird was flopping about in his death-throes.

Old Shadow sprung from his ambush and was in the act of stepping into the stream to wade across after the turkey, when he involuntarily started back, with sudden surprise. But it lasted only for a moment. The cause of it was the presence of the body of his late savage foe, floating on the surface of the water before him. But without giving the lifeless form a second glance, and being eager to secure his game, he stepped into the water and began wading across.

But at this instant there was a quick plash in the water, then the old scout felt his legs seized by the arms of the supposed dead Indian, and his feet jerked suddenly from under him. Then began another terrible struggle in the creek, but this time the savage had the advantage.

CHAPTER XXI.

VAMOSING THE RANCHE.

It was night—night within the robbers' hidden ranche. Lights were burning on the rough deal table around which fifteen men were sitting, wearing their numbered masks. No bottles nor cards ornamented their table. Matters of graver importance were before them.

"Well, what news have you for us to-night, Ten?" asked Pirate Paul of his spy.

"Nothing more than that we're in a fair way to get our necks haltered," was the spy's cool response.

"How? how?" asked a dozen voices.

"Well, sirs, there's a spy watching our movements—in fact, knows exactly where our ranche is—was in it but a few nights ago."

The robbers started violently, and a cry of surprise burst from their lips.

"Do you know who that spy is?" asked one.

"Yes. It is a woman."

"A woman!" burst from the lips of the astonished outlaws.

"Yes; one of the new-comers, Miss Martha Gregory. I heard her tell Sylveen Gray that Scott Shirely was her husband."

Another exclamation of surprise, mingled with suppressed laughter, burst from the lips of the masked villains.

"How's that, captain?" asked one; "didn't know you were a married man."

"Nor I either," replied the outlaw chief. "I thought I had tumbled that mulatto wench into the deepest hole in the St. Lawrence river where she would never get out again. But, she must have been possessed of the devil, and didn't

drown worth a cent, and has now come to dog my footsteps with her baby face and blue eyes. It appears that the traitor, El Pardou, was a friend of the Gregories, and he has put her on our track. But now, in order to save our necks and ranche, we have got to do two or three things. The settlers think we are on a fur-trading expedition—so we are. Now we want to trig up, *a la Indian*, as they would say in fashionable circles, capture Sylveen Gray and that Martha Gregory, as she calls herself. We will then carry them to the Indian village. There I will compel Sylveen to wed me, and Miss Martha I will give to Red Elk, for I have promised to take the red idiot a white wife. Martha will suit him I know, if he keeps his eyes out of reach of her finger nails. Devilish curious I never recognized her before."

"When had we better make the Indian move you propose, captain?" asked the spy.

"This blessed night. It won't do to delay the matter; for if that woman is my old flame, she may let the cat out and have the whole village upon us. So let us begin our toilet at once."

There was a general stir among the robbers, and for the next hour they were busily engaged in donning their Indian costume, which they always kept ready for such emergencies. Those that had long hair had it cut close to the skull, with the exception of the indispensable scalp-lock, and then painted a dirty red. Their hands and faces were also given a good coat of paint, which was declarative of their being on the war-path.

When the toilet was completed and they had gathered around their table to drink a parting bumper, one could not have told—not knowing—but that they were Indians. From long association with the red-men, they had learned their language, habits and movements to perfection, and it is not likely their disguise would be penetrated.

At length, when all were dressed and armed for the departure, Pirate Paul said:

"Now, boys, let us lean out for tall timber."

The lights were extinguished, and the next instant the grim, shadowy forms of the pirates were filing away through the black, echoless chambers of their hidden ranche.

CHAPTER XXII.

SYLVEEN'S MISTAKE.

Two days following Sylveen Gray's last interview with Ralph St. Leger, she and Martha Gregory were strolling leisurely along the river, near the lovers' old trysting-place, engaged in conversation.

Sylveen seemed sad at heart, and her emotions did not escape the notice of Miss Gregory.

"You seem sad at heart of late, Sylveen," she said; "why is it, dear? Has your lover deserted you?"

"No, Martha; I have deserted him."

"You don't say! Why, Sylveen?" and Miss Gregory turned pale. "Have you fallen in love with Scott Shirely?"

"No; but you remember what you told me about this ring, do you not?"

"Yes; I told you it was a charm against prairie pirates."

"Exactly; and so I became anxious to try it upon Ralph St. Leger, whom Shirely had told me was Pirate Paul. I met him at our old meeting-place, under this very tree. He saw the ring. He started and stared at it as though it had been a ghost, then made some excited inquiries in regard to it. What Shirely had said about him, and what you had said about the ring, led me to accuse him of being Pirate Paul; then, turning, I fled from his presence. But, oh, Martha! my poor heart is breaking. I can not give Ralph up, though he be Death-Notch himself!"

"No, you shall not give him up, Sylveen," exclaimed Martha. "There is some terrible mistake in this ring matter. Although I know not what occupation Ralph St. Leger follows, I know, beyond a doubt, he is not Pirate Paul nor one of his gang."

"But he acted as you said a robber would, when he saw the ring."

"That may all be, Sylveen; but, it's a mistake I had not calculated upon. Ralph may have known something of that ring long before it came into possession of him who gave it to me. But, rest assured, Ralph is not a robber."

"Oh, Heaven! then I have committed an unpardonable error I fear. I may never see Ralph again."

"I will do all I can to bring about a meeting and reconciliation," said Martha; "but, Sylveen, has Scott Shirely pressed his suit for your hand lately?"

"He has asked me to be his wife repeatedly. But I do not love him. I love Ralph alone. Still uncle Hatch is anxious that I should marry him—insists upon it, and says I will have to choose between him and poverty. I do not know what to do, Martha."

"Tell Scott Shirely to look at that ring the next time you see him. Ask him if he remembers the maiden he gave it to, in Quebec, scarcely a year and a half ago. Ask him whether the waters of the St. Lawrence ever give up their dead, and whether or not he has a wife already!"

Sylveen was startled by these remarks. They puzzled her.

"You appear to know Scott Shirely, Martha," she said.

"Know him? Alas, to my sorrow! I, Sylveen, am his lawfully wedded wife, whom he deceived, betrayed and tried to murder."

"Martha, is this really the fact?"

"It is, Sylveen. He gave me that ring, so you see why I gave it to you, for when he thought he had drowned me, he knew I had the ring on my finger; and by his seeing it had come to light again, I thought it might frighten the villain."

"Then he is a pirate?"

"Yes; he is Pirate Paul!"

A little cry burst from Sylveen's lips.

"Yes, he is Pirate Paul," continued Martha.

"And I am here to dog his footsteps and bring him to justice. But the hour has not yet come for me to strike."

"But, how did you find out that he is Pirate Paul?"

"Through a dear friend—El Pardou."

"The victim of Death-Notch?"

"No, the victim of the robbers themselves. They mistrusted him of being a spy, and having murdered him to avert suspicion, marked him and the tree under which he was found, with the totem of Death-Notch."

"Then you know where the robbers' hidden den is?"

"I do. I have been in it, and ere many days pass, it shall be made public. Shirely does not know that I live. He would kill me if he did. My love for him has turned to hatred, and I am here for revenge. But, Sylveen, here is a slip of paper and a pencil. Write a note and leave it here for Ralph. Ask his forgiveness, and for another interview."

"He might never come for it, Martha."

"He was here yesterday and the day before. He may come yet to-day. He cannot give up his love for you, dear Sylveen."

"How do you know he was here, Martha?"

"I have a spy on Shirely's track. He saw Ralph here. He saw him go each time and look into that hollow tree, as if half-expecting to find something there."

"It is our old post-office," cried Sylveen, a light of hope beaming in her eyes. "I will write him a note and leave it here. Oh, Ralph! Ralph! I hope you will forgive me!"

She took the paper and pencil and wrote a note, which, with a prayer of hope, she deposited in the hollow tree.

Then the two wended their way back to the village.

In less than half an hour later, that note was read, but not by Ralph St. Leger.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE CREEK.

THE two foes grappled in a deadly embrace—twisting themselves together like twining serpents, in pliant and subtle folds. So swift were their movements and evolutions that their bodies seemed incorporated into one. For awhile no one could have told how the battle went, for they fought at times beneath the water, and at other times they were enshrouded in a cloud of foam and spray.

For several minutes the conflict waxed hot. It was evident, too, that the strength of both was failing, for this conflict was less desperate than it first had been. Still, neither of them had drawn a weapon, and the struggle would have to be decided by main strength.

Suddenly, however, several figures emerged from the shadows of the woods, and gazed down on the struggling foes. They were savages, and a gleam of surprise and vengeance flashed from their eyes when they discovered the cause of the confusion in the water—saw their comrade in combat with the old hunter—saw that the tide of victory was slowly but surely turning in favor of the white man.

Quickly one of their number sprang into the creek and began wading to his friend's assistance, but, at the same instant, the rush of feet was heard on the opposite bank—a figure shot through the air, and landing on the savage, bore him down in the water. It was the friendly Omaha, while upon the bank, facing the savages on the opposite side, stood the Avengers, with their rifles leveled full at the breasts of the red foe.

A bloody conflict was only averted by a yell of triumph bursting from Omaha's lips, closely followed by another yell from the lips of Old Shadow.

The savages recoiled, and not wishing to engage in a struggle, the Avengers did not follow them up, nor fire a single shot.

Omaha and Old Shadow at once made their appearance from the creek. A scalp was at Omaha's girdle and a glow of triumph in his dark eyes. Old Shadow bore no trophy of his conflict, but he was gasping with exhaustion.

"Rather a tight place you were in, Shadow," said one of our young friends.

"Whoop, by crash!" he exclaimed, "ye bet it war now, but the cunnin' varlet has passed in his dockments. That war twic't he distarbed my prospect fur grub, the low-lived hound o'

Satan. But I tell ye, lads, wind is skarse 'bout this old karkass, and hunger is purty plenty. But I've got a fine turkey out thar, and feel much like I could take half o' it, feathers and all."

Omaha waded across the creek and procured the turkey, and then they all returned to where the Avengers had lighted a fire.

It required but a few minutes to dress the game in hunters' style, then it was roasted to a crisp brown, and a goodly portion of it eaten with a sharp appetite and keen relish.

After the meal was completed and the remnants of the turkey stowed away for future use, Old Shadow expressed his readiness to fight his way through to the Indian village.

The little band soon resumed its journey, and as the day advanced, the keen eye of Omaha detected a fresh trail in the yielding soil. There were the hoof-prints of two or three horses, and a number of moccasin-tracks. Both Omaha and Old Shadow agreed upon their being made by a party of white men; and they all had reason to believe it was a party of robbers, pushing for the Indian village.

The Avengers at once proposed to follow the trail, believing it would be a more practicable route to the Indian village than any other, for if it was the trail of enemies they would naturally select the best and nearest route known to them to reach the Indian stronghold.

Omaha took the trail, and like a beagle freed from the leash, he led his companions forward at a rapid pace.

The day wore gradually away. It wanted an hour of sunset when a low whistle broke suddenly from Old Shadow's lips. The party came to an instant halt.

"What now, Shadow?" asked one of the boys.

"Ah, that's it," he replied; "you fellers are young and limber; yer hearin' may be better than mine. Yer eyesight may be quicker and stronger than mine; age is goin' back on me in them faculties that were one't as clear and bright as a May mornin', but then I conceit that the sense o' smell is better in me than in any man on the border, all hounds included. And now, as sure as my skulp's over a warm head, there's a camp-fire close about. I detect the fumes of smoke in the air, and afore we go a foot furdur, prepose we reconnoiter our situation. What's yer verdict, lads?"

"Reconnoiter," was the general response. "That's the cackle; if thar's enny reds around, we'll set 'em up!" exclaimed the old hunter, and bringing the butt of his rifle heavily to the ground, he broke forth:

"The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog, At the ole—"

But here a gesture, significant of silence, from Omaha, arrested his singing, and the next moment he had relapsed into silence.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN INTRUDER IN CAMP.

MORE than an hour before sunset a party of about twenty persons went into camp in the solitude of the dense woods bordering the Sioux river. Most of the party—in fact, all but two—were dressed and painted as Indians. Their movements, their garbs and equipments were purely Indian, but the anatomical construction of the facial outlines told that they were white men in disguise.

The other two persons were females. They were captives, too, for their hands were bound before them and their heads were bowed in grief. They were young women, but exceedingly handsome, yet depressed in spirit and fatigued with journeying.

In the background two horses were cropping the foliage. Their backs showed saddle-marks, and had, in all probability, been ridden by the captive females.

The white Indians are lounging about in attitudes of listlessness and security. They seem to fear no danger. The savage they know is their friend, and there are no white parties around of sufficient strength to endanger their situation. So they can rest with impunity there beneath the panoply of the green forest trees, while their fair captives may chafe in spirit over their confinement, for it will avail them nothing.

A camp-fire is burning at one side, and one of the pale Indians is busy around it, broiling venison for their supper. It requires but a few minutes to prepare the meal, and when it is announced as ready, the hands of the captives are freed from their bonds. Then tender slices of the venison are brought to them, not on a silver tray, but on large green leaves. One of the captives accepts the proffered viand—the other refuses it.

"You had better take it, dear Sylveen," whispered Martha Gregory to her young friend; "it will give you strength which you may yet need, dearest."

Pretty, sad-hearted Sylveen Gray took the venison and ate it, and after all it proved quite delectable to her taste. It added strength to her body, and in so doing it strengthened her hope of being rescued from Pirate Paul and his minions, who had taken her and her friends captive.

morning while taking their usual walk in the woods near Stony Cliff.

The disguised men ate their supper in silence, then resumed their lounging attitudes; some engaged in smoking, others in silent thought.

Suddenly the whole band starts. Something like the sound of music reaches their ears, drifting through the forest aisles in notes faint as those of an Eolian harp—so faint as to be almost inaudible.

"What the deuce is it, anyhow?" asked Pirate Paul.

"Music, captain, sure as you're a sinner," replied one of his men, listening eagerly.

"Whew!" ejaculated another, "this must be paradise itself. The angels are tuning their harps."

The next instant every man is upon his feet. Those enchanting strains make all strangely anxious to know from whence such melody comes.

"We can't all leave at a time, boys," said Pirate Paul, glancing in a significant manner at the captives; "part go at a time and we'll last longer."

Seven or eight of the pirates resumed their positions of ease on the ground, while the others stole away in the direction from whence the music seemed to come.

As they move on and on, the sound gradually grows plainer, clearer and sweeter. They move with the silence of phantoms, almost entranced by the ravishing sounds that come to their ears. Surely it is an enchanted spot. They falter. Their wicked hearts grow cowardly. Something so sweet and heavenly in that music makes them feel as though they were approaching a hallowed spot with unclean spirits. Finally they pause. But the music swells out, nearer and sweeter than before. They can not resist its seductive inspiration. It fascinates them. It draws them on and on, until they stand upon the banks of a little stream, enchanted by what they see.

A little opening or glade is before them. In the center of it stands a little vine-embowered cabin. A narrow path leads from the door through an archway of flowers and creeping vines. They run their eyes along the path, and just before them, where it touches the creek, they see two persons seated—a girl and a young man. The former appears to them like an angel in a dream. In her lap she holds a Spanish guitar, over whose strings her little white fingers are fluttering like snow flakes, calling forth these sweet, melodious sounds.

They were enraptured; and that they might have a fairer view of the place and its inhabitants—that they might bring these sweet strains of music nearer, they parted the foliage and peered through upon the twain of lovers, Vida St. Leger and Fred Travis.

Leaving them to gaze enchanted upon the wildwood beauty and her lover, let us return to the robbers' camp, where Sylveen Gray and Martha Gregory are prisoners.

As soon as the captives had finished their meager supper, their hands were rebound. They were then placed in a small bower constructed for them of boughs and blankets.

Here the two women sat and talked over their misfortune and probable fate. Sylveen was sad at heart and low-spirited, while Martha was hopeful of being rescued, and defiant to her captors.

"Suddenly, however, their conversation was disturbed by a stranger voice that seemed to be approaching the camp, and singing, in a loud, jolly tone, the words:

"The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,
The ole hedgehog, the ole hedgehog,
The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,
Way down by the Squantum—"

"Halt, there!" suddenly rung out the voice of one of the robbers, and the peremptory demand was accompanied with the click of a gun-lock.

Old Shadow, for he the intruder was, ceased singing, and confronted the white Indian with apparent surprise.

"By the royal voice of the woods," he exclaimed, "if you ain't a sassy cuss, now! Who are ye, ennyhow?"

"Me Ingin," replied the outlaw, attempting to counterfeit bad English.

"Now, ole buck, I'd hate to tell ye that yer tellin' a snug little lie, but, nevertheless, it's a fact; you are a ginuwine, downright, flat-footed, bare-faced—"

"Be careful, idiot!" exclaimed the indignant prairie pirate; "you might utter yer death-war-rant."

"And you be keerful, ole mug-head, or I'll go through ye like an ounce chunk o' lead. I'm Ole Shader, I'd have ye know, ye villainous bull-pup, and if I one't flit across a man's vision, he's got his pass for the sulphur diggin's."

"You're an old, blab-mouthed fool," retorted the robber, growing bolder as his friends gathered around him.

"You measure others' grain in yer own bushel, I see," replied the old hunter; "but, Mister, what's in that bower?"

"None of your business," returned the indignant robber.

"Cool, very cool; ye must have an feel erg

atwixt yer cap and brain. But I can tell ye what's in that bower: it's *veemia*."

"Well, what's that to you?"

"Why, ye durned sap-headed scamp, ye stole 'em!"

"You tell a—"

The pirate did not finish the sentence, for the fist of Old Shadow was planted directly between his eyes, causing his heels to describe a semi-circle through the air.

The outlaw was a large, burly fellow, and no doubt possessed of twice the old hunter's strength; but, with all the grit of an old hound, the latter grappled with his adversary before he could regain his feet.

The other robbers gathered around the combatants to witness the certain annihilation of the impertinent old hunter; but they soon had a conflict of their own to prosecute. For the first blow from Old Shadow was the signal for the Avengers to make their appearance.

One discharge, however, of the Avengers' firearms caused the robbers to flee with terror. They attempted to rally when they saw the number of the foe, but were so closely pressed that they were compelled to continue their flight, leaving two or three of their number behind dead.

The victorious Avengers did not pursue them far. No time was to be lost, for they had seen the robbers under Pirate Paul leave the camp a few minutes before, and knew not how soon they would return. So they turned to assist Old Shadow; but neither he nor his foe was to be seen!

They saw at once, however, where the leaves and ground were torn up in a broad path extending down a steep inclination that finally terminated in a perpendicular embankment. The combatants must have rolled over this cliff, and had, in all probability, been dashed to atoms.

The Avengers hurried to the edge of the precipice and gazed down for their old friend.

A ludicrous and doleful sight met their view. The cliff was about twenty feet high, and at the bottom was a pool of stagnant water, whose bottom was a soft, oozy slush of black mud.

In the center of this pool lay the robber on his back, and astride of him sat Old Shadow, completely covered with mud, his cap off, and his hair straggling in muddy, dragged tresses down over his face and eyes.

The robber was struggling desperately, though every movement he made served to settle his body deeper and deeper in the water and mire.

Slowly and regularly as "clock-work" Old Shadow's bony fist arose and fell with a sodden sound in the face of the robber, while he gave vent to an ejaculation of vengeance between each blow.

"I'll smash (whack) your durned (whack) mug for (whack) you," he exclaimed, "ye lopin' (whack) gal-thief ye (whack), and I'll larn (whack) ye how to (whack) insult a (whack) gentleman arter (whack) this, too!"

"See here—stranger," the robber managed to blubber out, "I—I beg your—pardon."

Old Shadow paused to gain breath.

"So, ho!" he exclaimed, "ye beg, do ye, ye pizen big thief?"

"I'll admit you're the best man, stranger, so please let me up, or I'll suffocate."

"That's the right cackle, old snoozy; say on that way. Ye can't say enny thing that'll tech a tender spot quicker."

"If you're as hard all over as your cussed fist, you've no tender spot 'bout you."

Whack, came the old hunter's fist in the robber's face, causing him to bellow and beg for mercy.

"Then speak in a more perlitte manner 'bout my fist, ye vagabone ye."

The robber, seeing that no one came to his assistance, and that the hunter had the advantage of him, was compelled to submit to his terms, and as he begged manfully and politely, as Old Shadow termed it, was permitted to raise his head out of the mud and water. Still the old hunter maintained his seat upon his body, and leaning slightly forward, he laid the tips of his index fingers together, and with one eye half closed, he said in a reproving tone:

"Now then, you big gawk ye, I perpose to let ye go, hide and ha'r, but, let me give ye a leetle advice. Go and repent, wash yer face, and keep yer nose clean; and if ever the devil or his angels tempt ye to steal another gal, or call a gentleman a liar, think o' this mud-puddle and yours truly, and then say, 'Git ye behind me, Satan,' then go hum to your dad. Now, remember this advice."

The old hunter arose as he concluded his advice and permitted the robber to regain his feet, and sink away among the shrubbery.

When he was out of sight Old Shadow waded from the pool, ascended the cliff and rejoined his friends, the most doleful sight imaginable. He saw at once that the youths were fairly convulsed with suppressed laughter, and coolly said:

"Larf, lads, if ye feel like it. Never let enny-thing spoil a good, hearty larf. It's one o' the essences o' life, and worth more to one's digestion than all the yarbs known to Ingin medicul science. Now larf her out, lads. I know I'm

not very prepossessin' at present, but then, the mud'll soon wear off."

The young men could hold back no longer, and burst into a roar of laughter. But their joy was soon turned into disappointment, when Oinaha, who had gone to see after the captive maidens, returned with the news that they were not in the bower, nor could they be found anywhere about.

The hunters fled with affright, or had been spint out by the robbers. But, which ever way it was, they had no time for preparation. As they saw the return of Paul and his men returning through the woods, and not wishing to run the risk of an engagement with such a superior number of foes, they beat a hasty retreat into the woods.

CHAPTER XXV. A NIGHT OF TERRORS.

TERROR-stricken, Sylveen Gray and Martha Gregory had fled from the bower the instant the Avengers had made their charge upon the robbers, going in a southward direction. Although their hands were bound, they soon gained the cover of the woods; and then stopped. By placing their hands close together, they were enabled to untie their bonds.

They now hastened on, and not until the shadows of twilight had begun to gather around them did they halt to rest or consider the course they were following;—whether it led toward new danger, or toward safety. They at once found that they were entirely ignorant of their course, and felt certain that new dangers would beset their path during the night, or before they could reach a place of security.

"Martha," said Sylveen, "I fear we have not bettered our situation. Those that attacked the robbers were friends, undoubtedly. I think I recognized them as a party of young men who spent a few days at Stony Cliff."

"If we had taken a second thought we might have been saved of all this night's wandering about through the woods," replied Martha, "but I was so taken with the thought of escape that I never considered the consequence of our haste. However, it may be best after all, for those that attacked the robbers may have been defeated."

"That's all very true, Martha, so let us hurry on and get as far as possible from here before darkness sets in. No telling what terrors this night may bring forth. Death-Notch may be in these woods to-night."

They hurried rapidly on. They might have taken bearings by the last faint gleam of the setting sun, but they were too greatly terrified to think of that. They thought only of putting distance between the pirates and themselves.

The twilight soon deepened into darkness, rendering the gloom within the forest almost impenetrable. But, the moon soon came up, and although the trees above them shut out its rays from their path, the darkness became mitigated, and they were enabled to move on with less difficulty and fear.

But, already their minds were in a high state of excitement, and at every sound they would start with fear, expecting to see, the next instant, the terrible Death-Notch appear before them. This fear was agony itself, but there was no help for them now. They must breast it through.

They moved on, and at length emerged into a little opening where the moon's rays fell full and unobstructed upon the earth. Their path lay across this opening. They never pause, but press out into the glade which they see is clear. When half-way across it, hoof-strokes break upon their ears. They pause and look about them with a mingled feeling of hope and fear.

Forth from the shadows of the woods they see a horse appear. It is riderless. But it is bridled, and moves not like a horse escaped from its master. It seems to obey the volition of some invisible power.

It is moving at right angles with the fugitives' course. It pricks up its ears and shies slightly at sight of them. But it soon falls back into its former course, as if reined there by that invisible rider.

An old borderman would have suspicioned something wrong about that horse, but not so with the maidens.

"It is one of the robbers' horses, is it not, Sylveen?" asked Martha.

"It looks like one of them—the one you rode, Martha," replied Sylveen.

"I believe I will try and catch it. It has broke away from the robbers, and by obtaining possession of it, we can ride by turns and lessen the labor of our journey thereby."

So saying, she advanced with outstretched hand, calling kindly to the animal. It turned head slightly toward her and moved on. Martha stepped briskly to intercept it, and when she came within reach of him, she put out her hands and seized the reins; but at this instant her right of possession was disputed—a rider appeared on the back of the animal as if by magic. It was an Indian warrior!

Martha uttered a cry and started back. But she was too late—entrapped. The savage seized her. He had lifted her from the ground, and

placing her rudely across the withers of his horse, galloped away into the shadows of the woods.

Sylveen realized her lonely situation, and with a shrick of terror she fled across the opening and plunged into the illimitable darkness.

Poor girl! her situation was terrible now. An agonizing sense of her loneliness was now added to her fears and terrors, and a feeling of despondency came over her. But with light foot steps and heavy heart she hurried on.

Suddenly there was a broad, bright flash before her. She stopped. Her further progress was arrested. At her feet rolled the silent waters of the Sioux river.

Half despairing, the maiden sunk down and covering her face with her hands, gave way to a paroxysm of grief. What should she do? What could she do toward getting out of that interminable wilderness?

Then she endeavored to think. She recalled the fact of Stony Cliff being situated upon the river. A ray of hope was kindled within her breast when she thought that by following the course of the stream, she would reach the village. She arose to her feet. She gazed up and down the river to see which way it was flowing. Then a cloud of bitter disappointment came over her. She knew not whether she was *below* the village or *above* it!

Then, something lying at the edge of the water attracted her attention. It was an empty canoe. She walked down the bank and entered it. She was tired out with walking and concluded to risk herself in the canoe and journey down the river.

Taking up the paddle she headed the craft in the proper course and began her journey, keeping close within the shadows of the east shore.

She plied the paddle vigorously and with no little skill. The little craft went skimming over the water with great rapidity, yet for its size it seemed to draw considerable water, and dip slightly at one end.

The heart of the fair girl began to take courage. She felt almost certain she was traveling in the right direction to reach the village, and with this hopeful assurance of a speedy escape, she pressed on.

But, suddenly, there came to her ears, the dip of paddles. She ceased paddling and listened. True enough, a canoe was ascending the river. She leaned forward and endeavored to see through the gloom, but, all along the shore it was black as chaos. But out in the center of the river where the moon's rays fell unobstructed, there was a narrow belt of light, and within this she saw a canoe, with two occupants, coming up the river. They were Indians. This she could easily see by the plumes in their heads. They were sitting in the attitude of intense listening, and from this Sylveen judged they had heard the dip of her paddle.

With great presence of mind, the maiden ran her canoe close in shore where the darkness was intense, yet near where a single patch of moonlight, two or three feet in diameter, fell upon the water so bright that all the moon's rays seemed brought to a focus there.

Sylveen could still see the savages. They were moving slowly up the stream, still listening as if in doubt. She felt in hopes they would pass on. But they did not. Their savage curiosity was arrested and it would have to be satisfied ere they continued their journey.

Suddenly the hoarse croak of a frog was heard, almost under the very prow of her canoe. There was something so shrill and rasping in its notes that it caused her to start violently.

Then she heard a quick flounder, a splash in the water, a low gasp, a dull, sodden blow. She felt her canoe rocked by the waves and gazed intently into the gloom to see what produced those waves. A dull, phosphorescent gleam showed her two forms engaged in a silent death-struggle at the very prow of her canoe. What were they? Were they human? Surely they were. She could hear dull blows, a wheezing and gasps.

Beasts did not struggle thus—so silently, so deadly.

Sylveen was paralyzed with terror. She sat motionless and listened to the silent death-struggle. At last her terrible thoughts found involuntary expression in the words:

"Oh, who is it? who is it?"

"Death-Notch!"

The answer came in gasps—like that of a strangling being who had tried to raise his voice to a warning shriek. It paralyzed Sylveen with terror. She could not move a muscle. She sat like one in a trance, a graven image.

The struggling, however, soon ceased and all became as ominously silent as though the spot had never been called into creation.

Then the silence was broken by the dip of paddles. She turned her head and saw the canoe with the savages coming directly toward her. Escape from them, or the terrible young Scalp-Hunter, seemed impossible. There was no avenue of escape open to her. The river-bank was high and shelving.

Driven almost to desperation, she decided to throw herself beneath the waves, rather than suffer unknown horrors or endless captivity.

She gazed down at the black waters beneath

her. Her eyes fell upon the little patch of moonlight upon the water.

She started. She saw something float from the borders of the darkness into that patch of light. It was a human face upturned to the heavens and floating just above the surface of the water. Nobody was visible—it was alone—nothing but a white, ghostly face, across the forehead of which there was a streak of blood.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DANGERS INCREASE.

THAT her lover had been slain by Death-Notch, Sylveen Gray had not a single doubt. The dead she saw must have been severed entirely from the shoulders, and with face upturned, the ghastly spherical object was floating away.

Her scream, however, had caught the ears of the two savages in the canoe, and now they

blow, a wail of agony. Something has attacked the two Indians—has slain one of them! It requires a second thought to tell her what it is Death-Notch!

The struggle with the savages lasted only for a moment, then all became silent as the grave. The darkness conceals all from view. Sylveen can see nothing of the canoe nor the savages—they have vanished, and gradually her fears give way and hope revives.



OLD SHADOW SAW THE SAVAGE TURN, AND, PARTING THE FOLIAGE, PEER INTO HIS VERY FACE.—PAGE 18

It was a face over a ghostly, and ghastly, set with the rigidity of pain and death. It remained for only an instant in the moonlit space, then floated away into the darkness. But, it had remained long enough for her to recognize it. It was the face of her lover, Ralph St. Roger!

Her poor heart could stand its tortures no longer, and a cry of agony burst from her lips.

were heading rapidly toward her. But she was so terrified—so paralyzed with fear—that she could not move. She believed that Death-Notch was still concealed within reach of her, and that the first movement she made would bring the terrible creature upon her.

She sat motionless. The savages continued to approach her. They are within ten feet of her when she hears a quick

Several minutes pass by—minutes of silence, then she ventures to move out from her concealment. But, her canoe moves heavy and sluggish—something is clinging to it! She turns and sees a white, white face peering over the rim of the canoe upon her. She hears the word:

"Sylveen."

The voice sounded familiar to her. It was the

seemed almost exhausted and despairing. It was Ralph St. Leger's voice she was certain. She was silent with the mingled feelings of hope and terror.

"Sylveen," again repeated the voice, "it is I—Ralph St. Leger."

A cry burst from Sylveen's lips.

It was Ralph, and he was well and alive. The next moment he had thrown himself into the canoe, and, regardless of his plight, folded his sweetheart to his breast, and imprinted kisses of love upon her tremulous lips.

Both were speechless with joy. Neither thought of their last meeting and how they had parted. Love was all-powerful now.

When the first raptures of that meeting were over, each one expressed in words his and her joy of that meeting. Then many questions were asked and answered. The struggle under the cliff Ralph thus explained:

"I was concealed in the water, waiting for the two savages coming up the river. Suddenly I heard the dip of paddles coming down the river, and when you, sweet Sylveen, ran your canoe close in shore, where I was concealed to elude the savages, I knew it was you; and when the frog croaked so near by, I discovered it was a savage concealed under the prow of your canoe. I grappled with him, and—"

"Ah!" interrupted Sylveen, "then it was you who spoke the name of Death-Notch."

"Sh, dear Sylveen! I hear a footstep on the shore!" exclaimed Ralph, in an undertone.

They relapsed into silence, but heard nothing more of the footstep. Ralph seized the paddle and drove the canoe rapidly down the stream.

At length he spoke of the many dangers to which they were exposed, and then added:

"Sylveen, it is not far to my home. I will take you there to-night, for you are many miles from Stony Cliff. My dear little sister Vida will be ever so glad to see you."

"Your sister!" exclaimed Sylveen; "then you are not alone?"

"No, dear Sylveen, but since you accused me of being Pirate Paul, I have been worse than alone—I have been miserable."

"Then you did not receive the letter I left in the old hollow tree?"

"Letter? No, Sylveen, I found none there, though I have looked in that tree a dozen times since we parted last."

"I put one there, Ralph, asking your forgiveness. Some one must have found it."

"Then you have become convinced that I am innocent of your charge?"

"Yes, Ralph, and I hardly deserve your forgiveness. But I was misled. The young woman who gave me the ring you saw upon my finger that day said it would be a charm against prairie pirates. She said if any one evinced surprise at sight of it, and made inquiries about it, as you know you did, Ralph, I could set him down as a prairie pirate. And, as Scott Shirely had told me you were Pirate Paul, I thought Miss Gregory's ring confirmed the story."

"Scott Shirely accused me of being Pirate Paul? The merciless villain! I am satisfied, from letters I found directed to Pirate Paul and written in cipher, that he is Pirate Paul himself."

"Yes, he is, Ralph; this I know, for it was he who carried Martha Gregory and I away. But why, Ralph, did you start so at sight of that ring?"

"It was my dear mother's ring, and was taken from her by her murderers, the Indians, nearly two years ago. I knew it at a glance. From whom did your donor receive it, Sylveen?"

"From Scott Shirely, whom Martha Gregory says is her husband."

There was a momentary silence. It was too dark for Sylveen to see the expression of vengeance that swept over his face.

They talked on about Pirate Paul, Death-Notch, and upon other topics. Still they were happy and joyous, despite the dangers that surrounded them.

In the mean time Ralph worked busily at the paddle, and at length he turned from the river into the mouth of a small creek that was rendered black as Hades by the arched foliage of the trees along either shore.

After following the windings of this stream for some time, the canoe touched the shore, and Ralph said:

"We are at home, Sylveen."

He assisted her ashore and conducted her across the little glade toward his cabin.

A sweet, musical voice hailed them as they approached the door. It was Vida's voice.

Ralph responded to her greeting and then conducted Sylveen into the cabin. The room was lighted up with an oil lamp that burned on the table, where supper was waiting Ralph's return.

The youth introduced his little sister to his fair *protege*, and the maidens' spirits seemed to flow, as it were, into one channel of congeniality and love.

Fred Travis was out when the brother came home, but he soon made his appearance with Vida's rifle in hand.

"Ay, I see you are much better, my young Travis," said Ralph; "but why are you out in

the chill air with that wolf-bitten arm of yours so late?"

"I was scouting around your little Eden," said Fred. "Vida and I saw a number of Indians around this evening."

Ralph started, and for a moment that terrible fire of vengeance seemed kindling within his breast. But a word from Vida broke the awful spell.

"Yes, brother," the sister said, "about dark we saw as many as a dozen Indians on the south side of the branch. But they made no hostile demonstration and soon retired. But supper is waiting you, brother."

"Then let us partake, for I presume Sylveen is as hungry as I," said Ralph.

The little company sat down and partook of the viands prepared by Vida, and it was not a meager supply, for the wildwood furnished not only game, but various kinds of delicious wild fruits.

After supper was over, Ralph said:

"I will go out and look around the place a few minutes to see that we are in no danger."

He took his weapons, and having excused himself, left the cabin.

Sylveen now narrated to Vida and Fred the story of her capture by the prairie pirates, the attack of the Avengers, her escape, the recapture of her friend, her own adventures upon the river—in fact, everything that had transpired from the time of her capture up to that moment.

"Was there a young Indian with those that attacked the cabin?" asked Fred, after he had heard her story.

"I think there was," replied Sylveen. "I am almost positive it is the same party of young men and boys that spent a few days at Stony Cliff."

"They must be my friends!" exclaimed Fred; "and if they are, I hope they will happen this way; but if they do not, I will have to look them up to-morrow."

"Oh!"

The exclamation burst simultaneously from the lips of Vida and Sylveen, for at this juncture a strange sound rushed athwart the darkness without—a sound that thrilled the trio with sudden alarm.

"What was it?" passed from lip to lip; but no answer could be given.

Fred arose and going to the door, looked out. All was silent, nor could a living object be seen. He grew uneasy, but he did not permit a look or word to betray his thoughts or feelings.

They talked on, but were guarded and silent. The dark eyes of Vida looked trustfully and confidently into those of her lover. Each glance spoke the language of love plainer than words could have done.

The moments wore on. Ralph did not return. The door stood ajar and the least sound floated in to their ears.

An ominous silence had settled around the place, but suddenly that strange sound broke upon their ears again—a sound like the flapping of great wings.

Fred arose, and taking a rifle, went out into the yard. He could see nothing, and moved out and around the cabin—continuing still outward until he had reached the woods.

Vida and Sylveen sat alone, with wildly-throbbing hearts. Neither spoke; a silence as ominous as death settled around them.

All at once, as if actuated by a single impulse, both of the fair girls turned their eyes toward the curtained recess that Fred had occupied during his illness. Both were sure they had detected the low, suppressed breathing of something, either human or beast, behind that curtain.

They sat transfixed with inmost horror. There was an intuitive foreboding of some awful danger hanging over them. It struck them both as a gust of wind would have done.

They listened with their hands pressed upon their breasts to still their palpitating hearts. They were not mistaken—there was something breathing behind that curtain!

Terror is an awful agony to suffer. It blanches the cheeks, and causes the eyes to dilate, the lips to part and the breath to come hard.

Thus appeared the maidens. They sit with their eyes upon the curtain, unable to cry out, unable to move.

They see something touch the curtain—something darts through it. It is the glittering blade of a long knife. Then they see a downward flash—a rent is cut in the curtain, and—they see no more. There is a rush of feet. The light goes out. They are in darkness. The door is slammed violently shut. They are prisoners. And then a yell, that seems to issue in chorus from a thousand throats, makes the night hideous as it echoes and re-echoes in demoniac shrieks through the dark, wooded aisles.

Where now was Fred Travis? where was the young Scalp-Hunter? Alas! where, indeed?

CHAPTER XXVII THE VILLAINS' COMPACT.

How long Pirate Paul and his men would have stood and gazed upon Vida St. Leger, enraptured by the sweet melody of her voice and the

tones of her harp, there is no telling, had they not been suddenly startled by the report of firearms in the direction of the camp. Alarmed, they at once beat a hasty retreat, and reached camp to find it entirely deserted by all but three of their comrades, who lay dead upon the ground.

Their surprise and indignation knew no bounds. Pirate Paul cursed himself for ever permitting so many of his men to leave the camp. He cursed the fair being whose sweet voice he had permitted to draw them away, and swore an oath of vengeance upon her.

That the camp had been attacked by whites, there was not a doubt, for the three dead men were unscalped. But while they stood lamenting, in oaths and execrations, over their misfortune, in loss of men and captives, a human figure emerged from the undergrowth and approached them. That he was human was all they could make of him, for he was incrustated in a layer of black mud and dirt from head to foot.

"What the devil is this? Who, or what are you?" asked Pirate Paul.

"I'm Griff Morton, I am," said the doleful figure.

"Fiends and furies! How came these men slain? How came you in such a plight? Who did it? Speak, Griff Morton."

The robber narrated the whole transaction—the attack of the Avengers, and his own adventure in the pool, though he turned the tables, and made himself the hero of that conflict.

Pirate Paul ground his teeth and swore with rage—swore that he would wreak a bloody revenge upon the agents of his loss.

In the midst of his fury, an exclamation suddenly burst from the lips of one of his men. He had discovered a party of Indians approaching them, and no sooner did Pirate Paul see them, than a shout of joy burst from his lips, that was answered back by the savages.

The latter were Sioux, the party under Red Elk, with whom Pirate Paul was on intimate terms of friendship.

In a minute the two parties were together. The three dead pirates at once attracted Red Elk's attention.

"Has Le Subtile Fox had trouble?" he asked.

"Yes; a pack of white hounds, calling themselves Avengers, attacked my camp while most of my men were absent, and slew three of the guard, and escaped with two captive white squaws, one of which I intended for you for a wife."

"It is bad," replied Red Elk; "the Avengers are cunning. Red Elk set a trap for them, but they were like the wolves that scent danger, and stole away. Death-Notch, too, is in the woods."

"Seen him lately?" asked Pirate Paul.

"But last night he arose from the heart of our camp-fire, as he arose in the council-lodge on the night of the storm, when he fled on the horse of Le Subtile Fox."

"He is a terrible creature, chief; and these Avengers will soon be more terrible than he. They must be hunted down and burned with fire."

"Le Subtile Fox speaks the truth."

"Then let us to work, chief. Shall we go together?"

"What does the white chief say is best?"

"Can you bend two bows as easy as one?"

"Red Elk is strong, but he can bend one bow easier than two."

"Then if we work together we'll be as two bows; we will be strong, and the enemy can not defeat us; but if we go separate, we'll be as one bow—easy bent."

"The white chief speaks the truth. Red Elk is willing to join hands with him."

Then from this moment let our vengeance begin. The settlements must fall if we would reach the strong arm of our enemies."

"Le Subtile Fox should have been a red chief. His brain is quick. His mind is long and reaches far ahead. The white man's wigwams must fall; his horses be ridden away and his cattle slain; then he can not live as the red man does in the open woods, and by his rifle and bow."

"Then we can begin our work near here. But a short distance away stands a little cabin that I never knew was in existence till to-day. It must be the home of some old trapper. There is a beautiful white squaw there. She would make Le Subtile Fox or Red Elk a nice wife."

"The white chief speaks truly. She is beautiful as an angel."

"Then you have seen her?"

"To-day my braves discovered their wigwam for the first time. A cunning pale-face lives there."

"Did you intend to destroy the cabin and capture the beautiful white girl?"

"When night makes everything into shadows, then will we strike. While the white squaw sung to her pale-face lover by the creek, four of my braves entered their cabin and concealed themselves. Le Subtile Fox can take the pale squaw for his slave. Red Elk wants only scalps."

"Ah, you mean business, chief," replied Pirate Paul, "and by the time we can bury these dead men it will be dark—time to work—though

I do not see why darkness is necessary for two score Indians to capture a girl and boy."

"If by waiting for darkness we can save the life of the warrior, it will be well to do so," replied the diplomatic Red Elk.

"Yes, yes, Red Elk, that's all true; but here, boys, let us perform the last sad rites for these poor devils, by putting them under the ground."

It required but a few moments to inter the slain pirates in shallow graves, hollowed by means of knives and their hands; but by the time it was accomplished darkness had gathered over the forest.

Then these human demons took up their line of march toward the home of Ralph St. Leger.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DEATH-NOTCH IN TROUBLE.

AFTER leaving his cabin, Ralph St. Leger made a careful circuit of the hut, then moved out toward the woods. Here he caught sight of a shadowy figure moving away before him. He followed it, for, without a doubt, it was a skulking enemy. It led into the woods, where the darkness was so intense that he was not enabled to follow it otherwise than by sound. But he could hear the footsteps very plain. They were heavy and massive, unlike that of an Indian warrior, yet it was the footsteps of a prowling enemy.

Out some fifty yards in the wood, Ralph was suddenly startled by a quick step at his right. He halted. At that instant he hears a "whirr" over his head, then he feels something encircle his form like the folds of a huge serpent. He feels this band drawn suddenly tight. His hands are pinioned at his side. He struggles but his efforts only tend to tighten the clasp. He is jerked to his knees, then he is thrown prostrate upon the earth; he is within the coils of a lasso, a captive. A dozen savages close in upon him. He struggles with the desperation of a madman, but the heavy blow of a club strikes him half-unconscious.

The scene changes. It is still night, and in the forest a camp-fire is burning. Its rays, reaching outward and upward, strike upon the green foliage of the trees, seeming to transform them into gray rock towering aloft and forming a deep chasm, whose grim, stony facade was, apparently, dappled with sunlight, yet whose opening was lost in the darkness above.

Around this camp-fire half a dozen savages are moving hurriedly to and fro, their grim faces aglow with demoniac triumph. The cause of their excitement is readily manifested. Before them stands a white captive, whose hands are bound before him, and the ends of the thongs securely attached to a sapling.

The captive is Ralph St. Leger. His head is bare; he is stripped of everything but his trousers and hunting-shirt. He is perfectly resigned. There is no look of fear nor dejection in his fine dark eyes. He regards the vengeful spirit of his captors indifferently, and a smile of admiration passes over his face when he sees they are preparing for his torture.

A number of arrow-points are thrust into the fire, and a strong bow got in readiness for use. Then a savage warrior points to these and tells the captive what they are for, and, by mocks and jeers, endeavors to make him show some signs of fear. But the captive boy heeds not his words.

"The young pale-face is like the young tree against which he stands," said the savage, growing indignant at his success as a mocker; "he hears not the voice of the wind. But when the ax is cut into the bark, it is made to feel. It will wither and die. The pale-face boy shall feel."

The speaker was a young warrior about the age of the captive. He was the child of a chief—was brave and daring, and honored for the scalps he had taken. He was small and slender, yet agile as the panther, and strong as a young lion. As he concluded his threat, the young chief turned, took up a bow, plucked an arrow—whose point was ablaze—from the fire, and applied it to the bow-string.

He then stepped backward, drew the arrow almost to the head, and sent it whirling at the breast of the captive. The barbed and blazing point pierced the hunting-shirt of the captive, who flinched not. The weapon had only passed in until the barbs were concealed behind the shirt, yet it must have punctured the skin, for a little jet of smoke puffed outward, while the shaft of the arrow dropped downward, still clinging within the shirt by its barbs.

The savages watch the face of the captive for some manifest sign of pain, but he never flinches. The features do not relax their firmness of expression.

Another burning arrow was plucked from the fire and shot into the breast of the captive. Little puffs of smoke curl upward from the bosom of the hunting-shirt. It had a pungent odor, not unlike that of burning flesh. Still the captive flinches not, but smiles defiantly in the face of his foes.

Arrow after arrow was shot into his breast, until it bristled with the feathered shafts, and the hunting-shirt was beginning to smoke and crisp with heat. There was something strange—mysterious—in the fortitude of this won-

derful boy. He broke into a mocking, defiant laugh.

"Shoot your arrows, you red fiends," he said. "Fill my breast with them. Then they will not burn as my hatred of your accursed race does!"

"Waugh!" exclaimed the young chief. "A bird in a cage will sing sweet, when its heart is sad, and the young pale-face talks brave to conceal the pain that burns within its breast."

"Wild-Wind's tongue is crooked as the serpent's trail," replied our fearless boy.

Wild-Wind, the young chief, sprung toward the captive and dealt him a severe blow upon the head with the bow he held in his hand.

"Let the pale-face feel but half the weight of my arm," replied the insulted chief, "and let him fear me as he would Death-Notch, the young Scalp-Hunter."

"Wild-Wind is a coward, or he would not strike a prisoner," replied the youthful captive; "he is a weak squaw, a sucking wolf."

Again Wild-Wind dealt him a blow. But this was more than human nature—at least, such a nature as Ralph St. Leger's—could stand. The eyes of the youth flashed with a deadly fire of resentment. The great veins in his neck stood out like cordage. The face became set with a terrible expression. The breast heaved and the arms twitched as with convulsions. The power of Titan seemed infused into the frame of the captive. His arms are pressed gradually apart. His bonds snap in twain, and he stands free before his enemies. But it is only for a moment. Before a savage could move—with the swiftness of a dart, he grasps the shafts of the arrows in his breast with one hand, and tearing them out, hurled them, shafts forward, at the nearest savage. Then seizing a heavy, half-consumed fire-brand, he swung it aloft and swept the astounded foe down before him. The end of the club burst into a flame, and as it swept through the air like a hissing stream of fire, it threw a ghastly light over the features of the now mad avenger.

The red foes regained their feet and pressed hard upon him. Knives were thrust at his breast, but glanced off as though they had come in contact with the breast of a brazen image.

Foremost among the savage combatants is Wild-Wind. But the eye of Death-Notch has marked him. He presses toward him; he reaches him; he seizes him in a grasp by the throat that causes his eyes to start and his tongue to protrude. With the other hand he seizes him by the loin-cloth and raises him above his head, as though he had been a mere child, and with all his strength he dashes him with crushing force into the fire. Then he utters a wild, terrible yell, and with a bound he gains the darkness and freedom of the woods.

Bleeding, blinded and burned, Wild-Wind was dragged from the fire, and he at once slunk away into the forest, while the warriors bounded away in the pursuit. But the footsteps of the young pale-face were silent as the wind, and the baffled savages soon returned to look after their disabled young chief.

But they found him not. On the ground where he had fallen lay the savage first brained by the terrible firebrand. His face was turned upward; his head was scalped. His arm was outstretched and raised slightly from the ground, while the index finger was pointing, in a manner as natural as life, to a little tree upon which was cut a *fresh notch!*

The savages knew at once what it meant.

The young Scalp-Hunter had been there!

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN AMUSING ADVENTURE.

LITTLE did Fred Travis dream of the eyes that were fixed upon him the moment he left the door of the St. Legers' cabin. But he had scarcely reached the woods when a scream fell upon his ears. It came from the cabin, and he knew the girls must be in trouble, so turning about he ran back to the house. As he neared the door he saw there was no light within, and he heard the excited voices of savages and the terrified screams of Vida and Sylveen.

The brave youth made a dash at the door, but it was blocked with savage forms. He attempted to cut his way through but in vain. The foe closed in upon him and beat him down.

The next minute he was helpless in bonds, and was compelled to witness, with all the agony his heart could suffer, his adored little Vida and Sylveen Gray conducted from the cabin and hurried away toward the woods.

Then he, too, was compelled to rise, and follow his captors away, but in a different direction from that taken by the maidens and their captors.

A few minutes more and the home of Ralph and Vida St. Leger was in flames.

Fred was conducted due northward by about a dozen warriors, who seemed to fear pursuit, and traveled quite rapidly. The shadows of the forest did not deter them in the least in their haste. In fact darkness was preferable to them, for under its friendly cover, they had little to fear.

At daybreak, however, they came to a halt to seek the rest and refreshment that even a savage needs at times. They stopped in a little

wooded valley close to the edge of a treeless, shrubless slope of ground that arose gradually several hundred yards, where it again joined the timber. This beautiful opening faced the south, and was covered with a growth of short grass.

Fred was lashed to a tree so that he could sit down, and availing himself of this favor, he leaned his aching head against the tree-trunk, and was soon absorbed in his agonizing reflections.

What a fate had been his! Where now were the Avengers? Where was Death-Notch? and, above all others, where was Vida—his darling little Vida?

As the savages were entirely dependent on their rifle for food, a warrior was dispatched at once in quest of game. It was their scout. He was a tall, lithe-looking fellow with an eye of steel and powerful muscles.

Crossing the hillside opening, he entered the deep woods beyond. He had traversed its shadows but a few steps when a low clump of bushes before him suddenly parted, and a white, angular face confronted him, and a gruff voice said:

"Hold on thar, ye durned red vagabone, ye; hold on, I say, or down goes yer meat-house."

Quick as a flash the savage dropped himself upon the ground, thereby bringing a large fallen log between him and this unexpected enemy.

Old Shadow, for he the white man was, was in the act of leaping over the log when he discovered the muzzle of the Indian's rifle, and his dark eye gleaming along the barrel, leveled at his breast. Before he could fire, however, the old hunter dropped himself on the opposite side of the log. In this position they lay as silent as though they had been shot, each one waiting the movements of the other.

It was rather a novel situation for the two deadly foes, and, as it so happened, neither of them possessed other weapon than a rifle and knife. The former they could not use in their present situation, and the latter was of no use only in a hand-to-hand encounter.

Stratagem was the only expedient. Either one could have sprung to his feet and fled before the other had time to fire, but, where two such foes meet they never turn—never flinch before the tomahawk or rifle, even were it certain death to stand.

Several minutes passed by. The Indian lay as silent as the log, but the white man became restless and impatient, but finally broke off on his favorite song, "The old hedgehog, etc."

"Ugh!" burst from the savage's lips when he had concluded his song.

"Ye durned red hog," retorted the hunter, "what ye grantin' at round thar? Show yer greasy skin if ye want it punctuated. I'm Old Shader, old pizen, or old ennything, and I'll let a picayune that I kin whale a dozen o' ye. Jest show yerself, red-skin; come, trot out, ole boss, and show yer dirty self."

"Waugh!" replied the savage, indignantly. "Heap much big blow round there. White coward, pale-face dog barkin'."

"Complimentry, thank ye, red-skin," said Old Shadow, maneuvering about so as to get a shot or thrust at the savage, but wherever he attempted to peep over or around at the cunning red-skin, he would see the muzzle of his rifle just coming into view.

The old hunter knew that the savage was possessed of a patience that would keep him there a week, rather than make any risky demonstration. On the other hand, the savage was well aware that the white man would soon grow impatient, and resort to some trick to dislodge him, so he had only to remain on the defensive to insure himself of speedy action and certain victory. The Sioux had estimated the old hunter's patience and daring rashness by that of the general average of white hunters. In so doing he had underrated the old hunter's experience.

For some time Old Shadow tried to draw the savage out, so as to enable him to get a shot. The log was entirely too large for him to reach over and feel for the savage with his knife. Once he elevated his cap on his rifle in hopes of drawing the foe's fire, but he raised it half an inch too high, and the savage saw the gun-barrel under it.

"See here, ye cowardly bugger," he at last exclaimed, "if you don't leave over thar in a jiffy I'll squash the eternal's outen ye."

"Ugh! all blow—no do," was the rejoinder.

By tapping slightly upon the log, the old scout found it was hollow, and so, bracing his feet against a small bush, he applied his shoulder to the log, and, with a desperate effort, succeeded in rolling it toward the Indian. He had hoped by so doing to roll it on the savage, but he was too cunning to be caught thus, and retreated as the log advanced, yet kept himself in the same position behind the log.

The old hunter managed to roll the log out into the opening that sloped downward to the Indian camp. Here the savage contrived to stop it.

They were now within fair view of the Indian camp, which was not over three hundred yards away. The savage could easily have

called friends to his assistance; but, as he was contending with a single foe, such an act would have been a mark of cowardice, in an Indian's view of the case.

Old Shadow was fully aware of his close proximity to the enemy's camp, and he knew, if they discovered their friend's situation, curiosity would bring them there at once. Consequently, he knew he would have to bring matters to a speedy termination. But how was he to do it? He had, so far, found the savage ready for any emergency.

However, a thought soon struck him, bringing a smile to his knotty face, and, as he proceeded to carry it into execution, he began humming his favorite song.

He cut a long, tough switch that was within reach of him, and, with his knife in one hand and the rod in the other, he was ready for work.

"See here, Ingin, 'round thar," he said, "arn't ye gittin' a leetle tired o' yer sitchua-shun?"

A grunt was the only response.

"Say, red-dy," continued the scout, "talk up like a little man. You've tasted whisky, hain't ye? Now, tell me if, when ye war a boy, yer dad ever created ye to hickory ile?"

"Ugh!" was the only response. But it was enough. It told the old scout exactly where he was lying.

"Now, look sharp, ye nasty beast; I'm goin' to tan yer jacket for ye."

As he concluded, he raised the switch aloft and brought it down over the log with all his power. Being tough and pliable, it lapped easily around the log, and, being of sufficient length, its end came down across the naked back of the red-skin with such stinging force that it caused him to fairly bounce, and forced a low cry from his lips. The savage knew not from whence the blow came, and for an instant he grappled, with staring eyes, at an imaginary foe.

The old hunter followed up with another blow that forced a genuine yell from the savage's lips.

He knew now from whence they came.

"I know it's orful ticklish, red-skin; but ye'll have to take it, or shin out. Ye're a bad boy, ye are."

"Warrup!" "warrup!" came the switch over the log and on the red-skin's back, causing him to yell till he could have been heard for miles. It was a new torture to him—one that his silent fortitude could not stand.

The savages at the camp heard his cries. They could see him writhing about against the log, but could not tell the cause of his trouble. The log concealed Old Shadow from their view. However, they started up the hill to their friend's assistance; but, at this juncture, they saw something on the edge of the opening that caused them to fall back again.

Still Old Shadow plied his switch, indulging at the same time in a fit of laughter. Once he was sure he heard the suppressed laughter of some one else; but it must have been fear, for it seemed to come up from the ground beneath him.

The savage finally made one desperate effort to leap over the log upon the hunter, but the descending switch struck him fair in the face and sent him reeling backward.

Springing quickly to his feet, he turned and fled, half-blinded and with bleeding back, toward the camp.

With his face convulsed with laughter, Old Shadow arose quickly to his feet, and, instead of lying upon the fleeing wretch, he put his shoulder to the log and started it rolling down the smooth hillside. Directly on the path of the savage.

The log moved slowly at first, but soon gathered momentum and went whirling in rapid evolutions down the slope. It did not overtake the savage, but gave him hot chase, and, keeping on, it went crashing over the shrubbery on the edge of the glade, and finally came to a stop in the heart of the camp, one end of it stopping within half an arm's length of where Fred Travis sat bound.

Great excitement prevailed in the Indian camp, not only over their friend's adventure, but the appearance of nearly a dozen of whites on the upper side of the opening. It was the Avengers.

The savages crept to the edge of the glade to watch the movements of their foe.

For the time being Fred Travis was left alone—or, rather, was not under the eyes of his captors—but he was so firmly bound that no effort of his own could ever loosen the thongs. He saw what a golden opportunity was afforded him for escape. But, alas! who was there to free his bonds?

At this juncture his attention is attracted by the low chirrup of a cricket in the hollow log that had just dashed into camp. He fixes his eyes upon the dark hollow. He starts. He sees a human face, covered with dirt and mud, peering therefrom. He can scarcely suppress a cry of surprise. That face had been carried there, alive, in that hollow log! It was familiar to him—it was the face of Death-Notch—Ralph St. Leger!

CHAPTER XXX.

FRED MEETS HIS FRIENDS.

THE finger of the young Scalp-Hunter was upon his lips, significant of silence. Fred saw at once what he meant, yet it seemed a miracle that he could have been carried there alive without being mangled and bruised against the sides of the log. But he saw that the hollow was small—that his body filled it so closely that it could not be dashed against the sides, but had turned with the log.

After he had recovered from the blinding dizziness, consequent on being whirled around and around so often and rapidly, he began an examination of his situation. The first thing he saw was Fred, and at once made his presence known in the manner already described.

When he was sure Fred understood his intentions, he drew his knife, and, reaching out, severed his bonds. Then he glided from the log, and the next instant the two passed into the woods, and not until they were out of gunshot did the savages realize the state of affairs in the rear. A few of them gave chase, but, by a circuitous course, the fugitives reached the summit of the hill, and were there joined by the Avengers.

Great was the joy of these youths on their reunion with their young captain, whom they had given up as dead.

Fred introduced Ralph St. Leger to his friends, but said nothing of his being Death-Notch. But, from Omaha's actions, Fred mistrusted that his suspicions were aroused.

The Friendly and Old Shadow were deployed as scouts to watch the movements of the enemy in the valley below, and after Fred and his companions had compared notes, and talked over their adventures since the night of the storm, Ralph took him aside and said:

"It is useless, Fred, to presume that you do not know the fate of Vida and Sylveen."

A sigh of intense agony escaped Fred's lips.

"Yes, Ralph," he said, "I saw them carried away before my eyes, and I was helpless in the red demons' power—helpless as a child. It is agony, torturing agony to think about it."

"Why is it, Fred?"

"Why is it?" repeated Fred, startled by the tone of Ralph's voice.

"Yes; why is it agony to you? I knew Vida was a stranger to you before you came to our cabin, but perhaps Sylveen Gray—"

"I admit, Ralph, your sister's existence was unknown to me before the day she saved my life, but without her existence now, life to me will be an agony."

"You love her, then?"

"I do, Ralph; I love her as no man ever loved a woman before."

"You may think so; but did you confess your love to her?"

"I did."

"And tried to win her affections from me—her only friend?"

"No, no, Ralph; God forbid! I could not help loving her, and my love is reciprocated."

"Fred," and the young Scalp-Hunter's voice was low and half-choked, "I would do nothing to make you and Vida miserable. But she is young, and did I believe there was a tithe of deception in your heart—that you were deceiving her—I would shoot you dead. But I have a better opinion of you, Fred, and now you have only to prove that you love Vida as you say, by hazarding everything for her rescue."

"That will I do, even with my life," replied Travis.

"And I will ever be by your side, Fred; for as you love Vida, so I love Sylveen Gray."

"Together, then, we follow the foe, and you shall lead the Avengers, if you so desire."

"No, Travis; you are their chosen leader. Lead on, and as a scout I will render you every assistance I can. Of course the girls have been carried to the Indian village, and we will have to hasten there and do the best we can toward their release."

Here the conversation ended, and the two youths joined the Avengers, to whom Fred made known the fact that Ralph St. Leger would accompany them on their journey to the Indian village.

At a signal from the young captain, Omaha and Old Shadow came in, when a general understanding was had all around. Fred Travis was to lead as captain of the band.

The party now numbered ten, and with the exception of Old Shadow, were all young, active and brave; but, where the old hunter was wanting in youth, he excelled in bravery and experience.

The savages in the valley were soon seen to be moving away into the forest, evidently trying to elude the Avengers. But the latter had no desire to follow them. Their anxiety for the rescue of those of their friends who might be captives at the village set aside all offensive measures.

So the little band took up their line of march northward. Omaha and Old Shadow were deployed as scouts, while Ralph St. Leger acted in the capacity of guide, for to him every foot of that forest was familiar.

They pressed on quite rapidly, and when the shadows of evening began to fall, they found

themselves within five miles of the Sioux village.

Again they came to a halt. Scouts were sent out toward the town to reconnoiter the situation, and calculate their chances of rescuing the prisoners.

Omaha and Old Shadow were the scouts sent forward, but soon after their departure, Ralph went too. It was dark—pitchy dark—when the two scouts came in sight of the town. A hundred camp-fires marked the location of the place, and showed our two friends the round, conical lodges, and the dusky forms of warriors stalking about or standing before the fire, like bronze statues. In the background were hitched a number of ponies, bridled as if for instant use.

The two scouts decided to separate, with the intention of making a circuit of the encampment, each making half a round. They were to meet at a designated spot on the opposite side of the town, "compare notes," and report at once to the band.

Old Shadow went around to the left of the village, and with his usual daring, he moved rapidly and skillfully on, yet he was compelled more than once to conceal himself to elude discovery by the shadowy forms of Indian scouts that he saw stalking about through the night.

He pressed on, and finally came to a little wooden defile that caused him to make an abrupt detour to the left. It carried him over a mile from the town; and at the point where he would pass around the head of the defile was a little glade through which he would have to pass. He entered it without hesitation and pressed toward the opposite side. Just then a dark figure sprang from a clump of bushes and seized him by the throat.

It was a savage warrior of giant proportions and herculean strength.

The wiry old trapper struggled desperately for freedom, but he was no match for the powerful warrior, who had possessed himself of every advantage at the beginning.

With both hands gripped upon his throat, the giant savage held the old trapper at arm's-length, and pressed his fingers gradually tighter upon his jugular.

Old Shadow saw that all was up with him. He was being strangled to death, and every movement of his body added to his pain. He grew weaker each moment. His eyes started from their sockets and his tongue from his mouth. A purple haze was gathering before his eyes. Feebly he clutched at the arm of the savage, who now seemed magnified into a being of colossal stature.

To the old scout the dark belt of timber around the glade seemed spinning around and around. Direful sounds—shrieking demons and wailing winds rushed athwart the night. And from the borders of darkness—the woods—he sees a dark, shaggy form appear. It comes with a lumbering gait. Two orbs of fire gleam from the shaggy mass like the eyes of doom. The moonbeams falling upon it give it a weird and terrible appearance. But there is still life enough left for Old Shadow to see what it is. A huge black bear.

The beast is wounded. He is mad. Froth and blood are dripping from his mouth and nostrils. The feathered shaft of an arrow protrudes from his side.

He comes on toward the combatants. Old Shadow can see him, but the Indian can not. His back is toward it.

The bear approaches and rears up on his haunches behind the savage. He reaches out with his fore arms and grasps the savage in a deadly hug, and buries his white, glittering fangs in his naked shoulder. Old Shadow is saved!

A shriek burst from the lips of the savage. He relinquished his hold upon the old hunter's throat and attempted to turn upon his new adversary. But he could not. The bear held him in a more powerful embrace than he held the old hunter. Together they rolled to the earth.

Old Shadow gasped for breath, and staggering, fell to the earth. He soon regained his strength and breath, however, and rising to his feet, exclaimed:

"Whew! that's better. But, durn the b'ar, he come nigh bein' too late, the lazy, pokin' hummix. Go in thar, on yer muscle, ole b'ar. I'm in a hurry and can't stay enny longer foolin' round here. Squiz the darned varlet's carcass till his eyes bung out, ole b'ar, but I'll leave while my credit's good, so I will, by gum."

The old scout picked up his rifle, and turning, left the bear and savage down in their death-struggles, and hurrying across the opening, plunged into the dark, green wood beyond.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A DESERTED VILLAGE.

IN the meantime, Omaha was meeting with adventures no less exciting than Old Shadow, even if they were less dangerous.

He had made nearly the whole of his half of the circuit, when a rough brier thicket pressed his course in toward the village. This brought him in dangerous juxtaposition to an Indian sentinel seated on a log under a branching oak.

The Indian challenged him in the Sioux dialect, of which Omaha was a complete master.

The Friendly gave him a muttered reply, and, as retreat would likely arouse suspicion, he walked boldly up and seated himself on the log by the guard; though he kept his hand on his tomahawk.

The cunning sentinel seemed to be a little suspicious of the scout, and leaning forward he peered into his very face. The next instant Omaha's tomahawk was buried to the eye in his brain, and with scarcely a shudder, the Sioux sunk to the earth.

This deed was done so silently that it suggested a daring adventure to the scout. He divested himself of his own clothing and donned that of the dead Sioux, from moccasins to head-dress. Then a few skillful touches of war-paint—which the Omaha always carried—changed him into a Sioux, and with the guard's blanket around his shoulders, his rifle in his hand, the youth turned and strode into the village with a boldness that served its purpose and aroused no suspicion. The savages were hurrying to and fro through the village in no little excitement. They seemed upon the eve of some event of unusual character.

Omaha soon found that his disguise was perfect, yet he did not betray the least sign of curiosity. He kept constantly on the move, passing from lodge to lodge to ascertain whether or not there were any captives in the village. He found nothing, and would have departed at once had he not been a little desirous of knowing what the savages meant by the hasty and excited stirring about. Had it only been a temporary encampment he would have at once concluded they were going to break camp, but it being their permanent village he was thrown into a quandary, from which he resolved to relieve himself.

He mingled with the largest parties, and in moving about with them, finally found himself near the tent of the Great Medicine. This dignitary he knew was a white man. He had learned it from one who had once been a captive in the hands of the Sioux. He was satisfied he was a cowardly villain, who, knowing the sacredness with which he was guarded, never dreamed that an enemy could possibly get into his tent. Acting upon this belief, Omaha raised the flap-door and entered the lodge.

The Medicine-man sat upon a deep pile of skins, enveloped in the folds of a curious yet beautifully wrought blanket, and smoking a pipe on the head of his tomahawk.

He scarcely moved his head when Omaha entered, but, when the latter addressed him in a low tone, he glanced quickly up at him, as if he penetrated his disguise through the medium of his voice. Then he replied in a tone that was low and guttural in its accents. But now it was Omaha's turn to stare.

The Medicine-man seemed to notice his embarrassment, and began puffing away at his pipe until his head and face had disappeared from Omaha's sight, in a cloud of smoke.

"What does the young brave want in the lodge of the great Medicine?" the man of herbs finally asked.

"He comes for words that will cure his heart of the dread of Death-Notch, the pale-face that hunts for Sioux scalps."

"Then the young warrior's heart is cowardly."

"I have taken many scalps in battle, and does not every heart tremble at the name of Death-Notch?"

"Yes; the young Scalp-Hunter is a terrible foe, yet he is but mortal. Arrows or bullets well aimed will slay him. But you are not in fear of him. You are disguised. You are an enemy to the Sioux—you are Omaha, the Friendly."

The young scout grasped his tomahawk; but, before he could raise it, the Medicine laid his hand upon his arm, and said:

"Let Omaha have no fear of me! I know why you are here—the same for which I came. The Medicine-man lies dead under the skins I sit upon. Look, Omaha, at that lodge-pole. It bears a notch upon it. I cut it there! I am Death-Notch! Go leave me quick; you look so like a Sioux that I might slay you. Go back to those that await you, and tell them that there are many captives here, and that Inkpaducah is preparing to move his village at daybreak."

Omaha waited for no further orders or information, but left the lodge and soon worked himself from the village.

A few moments later he heard a savage yell, which satisfied him that Death-Notch's presence had been discovered.

Out in the forest, at the appointed place, Omaha and Old Shadow met. They exchanged a few hasty words and then began their retreat to the camp of the Avengers. As they moved on, each told the other his adventures, and when Old Shadow learned of Death-Notch being in the Indian village, he said:

"Whew! bet a picayune h'ar 'll fly while that critter's in camp; but, enny diskivery of the gals?"

"Yes; Death-Notch said they were there."

"That's the cackle!" the old hunter exclaimed, "and we'll have 'em or bust."

In due time the scouts arrived in camp. Ralph St. Leger was there. They at once delivered

their information to their friends. When Omaha narrated his adventure with Death-Notch in the lodge of the Medicine, a smile was seen to play about the lips of Ralph St. Leger, but none save Fred Travis and Omaha knew its import.

Now arose the question: how were the captives to be rescued? The question was easier asked than answered, for the enemy were fifty to one, and would have to be attacked within their own stronghold. However, the captives must be rescued at all hazards, and the little band resolved to make the attempt that night—near morning.

So a guard was posted, and the band lay down to get a few hours' rest and sleep before the time for the ordeal came. But no sleep came to the eyes of one of the party. They all lay upon the hard earth, thinking of the coming conflict and its probable result. They had little upon which to base a single hope of victory, but men under such circumstances are determined and desperate. They never let a fear or doubt stay a resolution.

Each one of the little band, unless it was Old Shadow, had pictured to himself the rescue of a friend—either a sweetheart, sister or mother. Even Omaha had hopes of meeting friends taken captive by the Sioux in their raid upon the Omaha country.

When the hour for action had come, every man was upon his feet, with rifle in hand, and under the guidance of Old Shadow, they set off toward the Indian village.

As they neared the town they were not a little surprised at the deep silence that prevailed around the place. Not the bark of a dog could be heard, nor the glimmer of a dying camp-fire seen. All was wrapt in profound silence and darkness. There were, however, voices in the wilderness. The sharp bark of a wolf hanging on the outskirts of the village, the "who-who-hoo" of the owl, and the wailing of insects could be heard all around.

"Durn my ole riggin'!" exclaimed Old Shadow, "things seem a little dull and glum down thar. I reckon as what Death-Notch put a damper on their spirits when he caved in the clam-shell of their ole Medicine humbug, and they've all gone into mournin' over it."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Omaha, "that silence mean something else—something unusual."

"It is singular that not a sound can be heard from the village," said Fred Travis.

"All in bed, I reckon," said Old Shadow, "and I'd give a picayune to knock the bottom out and heave the whole caboodle into the sulphur diggin's. But see here, boyees, I'll make a little feel down to'rds the camp and see what's up."

"Very well; we will remain here till you return," said Travis.

The old scout took his departure, and something like half an hour had elapsed when he was heard coming toward them, singing:

"The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,
At the ole hedgehog, at the ole—"

"Hark, there!" suddenly demanded Phelix O'Ray, "yees will arrhouse the whole Inging country wid that bell-clapper ave yourn. Dem it, man, what do ye mane?"

"Givin' vent to the exuberance of my spir'its! I am, young Ireland," replied the scout.

"Well, what discovery, old friend?" asked Travis.

"The red varlets have gone—every cuss o' 'em—weemen, men, brats and all."

"What! broke camp?" exclaimed St. Leger.

"Yes; Death-Notch's doin' must hev' hurried 'em up a leetle. They went westward, and my 'pinion is they'll not stop this side o' the Big Muddy."

"Boys," said St. Leger, and his voice was sad and low, "I am afraid it will be a long time ere our hopes are realized, if they ever are. But, what say you, Avengers? Shall we take up their trail and follow them, or not?"

"Follow them!—trail them to death!" cried Fred Travis, and his words were repeated by every tongue.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON THE TRAIL.

At early dawn the following morning, the Avengers were upon the trail.

From the course taken by the Sioux, it was evident they were aiming for the country beyond the Missouri river. They had every advantage of their pursuers not only in the start and in point of strength, but they were mounted, and in a fair way of increasing instead of diminishing the distance between them. However, the hardy band pressed on with a desperate determination to accomplish their object—to rescue their friends.

For two days they traveled, without coming in sight of the main column of the savages, but the freshness of their animals' hoof-prints told that they were not far in advance; and, occasionally, a scout was seen scouring over the plain at either the right or the left of the trail.

On the second night the pursuers camped in a deep and densely wooded defile in that picturesque range of bluffs overlooking the Missouri river. Scrubby oaks of some fifteen or

twenty feet in height, interlaced with wild grape-vines and creepers, covered the face of the bluffs, and extending down into the bottom, blocked from view the entrance to the defile.

Once within the defile, it could only be left by the way it was entered, for the cliffs on all sides were perpendicular, and in some places shelving. It was dark when our friends reached this secluded spot. For fear of danger they did not strike a fire. It is well they did not, for Omaha, who had been put on guard soon made his appearance in camp and said:

"We are in danger. Three score of Sioux warriors have encamped on the plain near the mouth of the defile."

"By snakes!" exclaimed Old Shadow, "that's a fact, for I can sniff the smoke o' their camp-fire this blessed minit. Ah, there goes a red varlet's bazzoo."

"I'm afraid we're in a close place," said Ralph St. Leger.

"Bet a picayune on it, Ralph," said the hunter; "if they don't know we're here now they'll find it out purty soon in the mornin', or ye may take my mouth for a fly-trap."

"I presume we have not been as cautious as we should have been, if we have let savages coop us up in this defile," said Fred Travis.

"Wal, I'll tell ye, younker, we can come Death-Notch on't and cut our way out of here rather than perish. But jist lay low and things may all work out right yit."

And, acting upon this advice, guards were posted wherever there was the least chance of a savage approaching; then those not on duty lay down to rest.

The night wore away, and morning dawned clear and bright; and as the sun glanced across the plain, the Avengers saw the danger that menaced them. Fully three score of savage warriors were encamped on the plain, close up to the little clump of oaks that stood like a door at the mouth of the defile. Their animals were picketed to grass west of the camp. A row of lances, stuck in the ground, were aligned in a semicircle about the camp, and at the foot of each weapon lay its owner's side-arms and horse-equipage.

They were upon the war-path. This our friends could tell by their paint and the absence of females. But why had they encamped there?

Our friends saw them build small fires and broil venison upon them. This done, they eat their meal in silence. Then some strolled out along the base of the cliffs, while others lounged about in listless, idle attitudes that convinced the Avengers they had gone into temporary encampment for, no telling how long, nor for what purpose.

This was an unfortunate state of affairs for our friends. They could not make their exit from the defile by a rear passage. If they would escape at all, it must be made through the defile where they had entered, in the very face of the foe.

Toward noon several of the warriors had mounted their ponies, took up their lances and galloped away toward the south.

"Blast 'em!" muttered Old Shadow, "the royal ole devil's in 'em red-skins, boys. We're elected for a day or two, ennyhow. Ther lopin' bounds are goin' off on a hunt. They've properly diskivered a herd o' buffalo."

"Time will tell," said Ralph St. Leger. "We have only got to be quiet and patient. If the savages do not discover our trail leading into the defile, we may escape them."

An hour or more had passed when a yell of a savage triumph was heard far over the plain. Our friends turned their eyes in the direction from whence the sound came, and saw the warriors that had left camp returning. They were leading two riderless horses, and on the point of a lance two reeking scalps were dangling. These spoke plainer than words of what had taken them from camp. The horses they led were of the new American stock, spirited and mettlesome, and had evidently belonged to white men.

When the savages entered camp they were greeted with a joyous shout. They drew rein, thrust their spears in the ground and dismounted. They tethered their ponies at grass again; but the two captured animals were retained in camp to be admired and commented upon.

Presently two athletic-looking warriors, stripped of all their clothing but the loin-cloth, came forward and mounted the fretting, chafing animals, and, with the two scalps attached to a spear-head, they dashed away at a furious speed and rode in a circle about the camp, uttering their fearful scalp-cry and executing wondrous feats of horsemanship.

They rode out and out from the camp in a spiral line. At last one of the demon riders dashes away over the plain at a fearful speed, while the horse of the other became unmanageable, and bounding away toward the bluffs, plunged into the dense body of shrubbery and came charging up into the the defile—in the very midst of our friends!

"Kapter the varlet, boys, kapter him!" exclaimed Old Shadow, in an undertone.

Quick as said the youths leaped from their covert, and while Death-Notch seized the ani-

mal by the bits and threw it back upon its haunches, others seized the savage, and, dragging him to the earth, bound and gagged him before he could give the alarm. Not a sound, likely to create suspicion, was made. But, what now were our friends to do with him? His non-appearance would soon bring friends into the defile in search of him. Then escape would be impossible.

Omaha was put on the watch, and he saw that the savages on the plain had turned their heads and were watching the savage that was riding over the prairie, though now and then they would glance anxiously toward the chaparral at the mouth of the defile.

"What do ye say to do with the blasted skunk, boys?" asked Old Shadow; "come, belch out yer 'pinion, fur we've not a minit to lose."

"No, time is precious. This Indian must be got out of here at once, or every red-skin will be upon us."

"That's the cackle, and I perpose we send him outen here a-flunkin'," replied Old Shadow.

"How will we do it?" asked young Harriot.

"Bind him on the back of this hoss, put a burr under the critter's tail, turn him loose, and let it go outen the defile."

The savage seemed to have understood the old hunter's words, and the look he fixed upon him fairly caused him to wince.

"It will be our only chance, boys," Fred Travis said, in reply to the old hunter, "and if it works successfully, the attitude of the savage on the horse may draw the attention of his friends so as to give us an opportunity to escape from the defile, and hide ourselves in the adjacent chaparral."

"That's the cackle, Freddy," said the hunter; "now, let's lift the stinkin' sinner to the hoss's back. There, up he goes—steady, hoss! Here, one o' ye pull off the critter's halter and bridle to tie the varlet on with."

The bridle and halter were taken off the trembling beast, and while St. Leger held him by the muzzle, the others bound the savage to the beast's back.

When the task was completed, the animal's head was turned down the defile, then one of the avengers gave it a cut with a keen switch that sent it plunging in madness and affright down the stony valley.

Like an arrow it shot from the chaparral out onto the plain, and, with glowing eyes and dilated nostrils, it dashed through the camp of the savages, trampling down the warriors that appeared in its path, and plunging wildly and madly on over the prairie.

The savages stood dumbfounded and amazed. They could scarcely realize the perilous situation of their friend, nor the manner in which he had gotten into such a dilemma. The change from the free rider to the helpless, bound prisoner, as it were, was made so quick that they could attribute his situation to no other source than his own free and fearless will.

They believed he put himself in that position to make a more startling display of his feats of horsemanship and wonderful daring, but, when his cries for help rung out over the plain, they supposed he had become entangled in the gearings of the animal. Wild with excitement, some of the warriors dashed away on foot in pursuit of the flying steed, while those that took a second thought mounted their ponies and spurred away.

Omaha, the look-out, at once reported the run of affairs. The camp was deserted by all but half a dozen warriors.

"Let us wait until the others are out of gunshot," said Ralph St. Leger; "then we can make a charge upon those in camp, drive them off, and mount some of their best ponies and flee."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Old Shadow; "you've got the right vim about you. A hoss will be quite an item to me, while to a hoss I'd be a mere shader."

At this juncture Omaha informed them that the savages were a quarter of a mile away in hot pursuit of the flying steed and its hapless burden.

"Then, forward, boys," exclaimed young Travis; "make your aim certain, and your choice of a pony good."

Like shadows the Avengers glided from the defile, through the chaparral, and out onto the plain.

Then followed the clash of fire-arms, mingled with yells of terror and shouts of victory.

The savages that do not fall under the Avengers' fire flee across the plain, while the white foe dash through their camp toward their ponies.

It required but a few seconds for the men to select a good pony each and mount it; but, by this time the other savages had discovered what was going on at camp, and had turned back upon the Avengers. But the latter had got several rods the start, and the ponies that they did not appropriate they managed to stampede.

Still there were about thirty of the pursuers that were mounted, and a wild, hot chase at once began.

The young Avengers headed directly toward the Missouri river, over five miles away. The plain, to the river's bank, was an unbroken waste of smooth, level prairie, covered with a growth of tall grass, that brushed the knees of the riders.

After an exciting ride the river was reached, but its banks offered our friends no advantages of defense; and, with a fearlessness and daring so remarkably characteristic of the true border-men, they spurred their animals into the turbulent current of the great river, and, after a fearful struggle with the waves, succeeded in swimming to the opposite shore, though the current had carried them over a quarter of a mile down the stream. But, before they had scarcely put the river between themselves and the foe, the latter appeared on the opposite shore.

With a yell of defiance, the fugitives pressed on into the dense Nebraska forest.

The savages, burning mad with a thirst for vengeance, pressed their animals into the water, and swam the river also, and continued the chase.

For several miles now their course lay through a wooded valley, and our friends did not ride in a body nor line, but scattered out, so as to make their trail more difficult to follow. But, in so doing they endeavored to keep within sight of each other.

After an hour or more riding through the woods, they debouched into a great Nebraska plain, stretching away for leagues and leagues into the hazy distance.

Death-Notch was the first upon the plain. He drew rein. One by one his companions came from the woods on either side of him, until all were present but Old Shadow. They waited for him, but he did not come, and the party were sorely uneasy about him.

Seeing he did not make his appearance, Ralph St. Leger asked:

"Who of you, boys, saw him after we scattered out?"

"Faith and mees see'd him once, and it was far behind he was," said Phelix O'Ray, "for it war a sorry ould divil of a baste he war riding. He war using heel, whip and tongue to make the critter keep up, but about played out he war, sure now. Mees s'pects the red niggers hev got the poor old bag-ov-bones."

"Too bad, too bad," said Fred Travis; "but hark! I hear the yells of the red demons—they are in the woods—they are after us! Let us away."

They again turned their animals' heads westward and rode on. Ever and anon they looked back in hopes of seeing Old Shadow emerge from the woods. But their hopes were in vain; he came not. But they did see the savages come out of the woods on their trail. They were over two miles away, yet our friends could see that they were not pursuing under whip, but riding leisurely on.

Our friends aimed to keep the same distance between themselves and the savages. This they were enabled to do, however, without riding as hard as usual.

The sun declined slowly westward. It wanted an hour of sunset when they discovered that the savages had given up the pursuit entirely—that they were nowhere to be seen. There was something singular about this—something which induced them to believe it meant them no good.

It was now sunset, and they were debating the subject of going into camp. Some were in favor of continuing on, but before they could decide upon either course, they suddenly discovered a dense black smoke rolling heavenward far behind them.

"What does that mean?" asked one.

"Look," said Omaha, pointing down at the ground.

All saw at once what he meant. Although it was midsummer, and the plain was covered with a growth of green grass, the old fog, or last year's growth, still remained, and was dry and combustible as tinder.

It was this old grass that their savage pursuers had fired, and the light breeze was carrying it directly toward them. There was nothing to be feared from this fire but suffocating by the hot, fetid smoke.

The green grass would keep the flames in check, from sweeping onward like an irresistible wave, but the smoke arising therefrom would soon cover the face of the great plain, and make it impossible for one to live and breathe under it. This the savages knew, and they had fired the prairie with the intention of smoking the Avengers across the plain, and in all probability, into some trap which they had or would have prepared.

As the shadows of night continued to gather, the light of the burning prairie began to shoot athwart the sky, and roll in dull, lurid waves down toward them with no little rapidity.

"Let us press on, boys, a little faster," said young Travis; "if the wind should gain strength, it will scatter the smoke over the whole plain and suffocate us. If, however, we should come to a water-course, we might make a halt and escape the dangers of the fire. But I will not consent to desert my pony to the mercy

of the fire, now that it has carried me beyond immediate peril."

"Nor I," repeated his companions.

They galloped along at a slow pace, conversing in an undertone, when, suddenly, their jaded animals pricked up their ears and sniffed the air uneasily.

"Boys," said Death-Notch, "there is danger about. These animals—"

He did not finish the sentence. A terrible sound rushed suddenly athwart the darkness. It was a sound resembling the roll of thunder—deep-toned and awful—low at first, but gradually gathering volume of sound. But it was not thunder. The sky was clear. Besides that, sound seemed rolling along the face of the earth. There was no doubt of this, for they could feel the very ground trembling under their animals' hoofs.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BUFFALO-CHASE.

THE day was two-thirds gone. The sky was clear and the sun shone hot and sultry. The great Nebraska plain lay glimmering with waves of heat, as though an internal fire was burning beneath its surface.

A herd of buffalo along a small stream that found its way into the Platte river, was the only object to be seen upon that plain. The shaggy beasts were panting with heat. Some were wallowing in the creek, others lolling beneath a fringe of willows, while others were rummaging about in the tall grass with restless impatience. They seemed to rest in perfect security, for not even a skulking coyote was to be seen.

Far away upon the crest of a prairie wave, however, a pair of black eyes were eagerly watching them. They were the eyes of an Indian warrior. But, why should he be watching the buffalo?

He kept his black, covetous eyes upon them for several minutes, and when he had assured himself that they had not detected his presence, he turned and crawled away through the grass, and when the crest of the hill concealed him from view of the buffalo, he arose to his feet and continued a few paces further on, when he came in sight of a band of mounted warriors drawn up in line in the valley below.

With his hand the Indian motioned to them, whereupon the whole party, numbering some thirty, galloped up the hill and drew rein before their scout.

The latter quickly communicated to them the position of the buffalo, and the way by which they might be approached as near as possible without giving the alarm.

The savages were not all red-men. There were whites and half-breeds in the party, but they were no less savage and brutal-looking than their companions. They were all well-mounted, and their trappings showed that they were a hunting party. Some carried rifles, others lances, and a few carried lassoes of raw-hide.

No sooner had the scout given the situation of the herd, than the whole band moved cautiously around the hill, thereby availing themselves of every possible screen that would enable them to approach nearer the buffalo without being seen. As they were to the leeward of the herd, they succeeded in getting within two hundred yards of them, when an old bull detected their presence, and with a snort, he dashed along down the creek with a low bellow, arousing his companions from their noontide siesta.

Then forth from the cool shade of the willows and the water, the buffalo went pouring in one continual stream, their hoof-strokes sounding like the sullen roar of thunder. For fully a mile along the creek the huge, shaggy beasts came charging out from among the willows with a snort and bellow, and swept away over the plain like a mighty wave, rising and falling with the undulations of the great prairie.

With whoop and yell the savages gave pursuit, pressing their animals forward at the top of their speed.

For over a mile the chase continued with but little advantage to the pursuers, for upon such a hot, sultry plain it was impossible for either man or beast to exert themselves to their utmost for a great length of time. And among those thousands of shaggy forms it was impossible for the weak ones to hold out with the stronger, and soon the pursuers saw that stragglers were falling in the rear. There were both cows and calves among the lagging, but the latter were the most desirable of all for food.

The savages pressed on, and two or three fine calves were soon secured, but it was a grand hunt, and not until darkness fell would the chase close.

The herd spread out over the plain with a front of a mile, and as the shadows of evening came on and the air grew more vibrant, the pounding of the hoofs on the plain fairly shook it to its center.

Still the hunters pressed on. One by one the herd fell. The trail lay strewn with carcasses; some had been shot and others impaled with lances. The chase once over, the hunters will go back and secure the most desirable of them.

The shadows of evening begin to fall. Twi-

light deepens into darkness. Still the chase goes on, but, one by one the savages have dropped off, until there are but three or four now in pursuit. One of these is a white man—a huge, burly fellow of giant strength. He carries a heavy lasso in his hand, and his eyes are set upon a fine young bull. He has been watching it for some time with the intention of lassoing it.

In their headlong flight the beasts dash through a marshy slough, and the feet of those before trample it into such a mire that a number of the stragglers were "swamped."

Here the white renegade was successful. The object of his eye sunk partly in the mire, and before it could extricate itself, the fatal noose had encircled its neck. He then learned, for the first time, that it had been the object of two or three of his companions, who rushed up to claim it. But the renegade's claim was undeniable, and he forbade his friends slaying it. It was his, and he then and there avowed his intention of leading it back to the camp alive, as a witness of his skill with the lasso.

This was something new as well as novel, and his companions assisted him to secure the young beast while it was still tangled in the meshes of the rope and the mire.

At this juncture a new party of savages made its appearance, coming from the east. There were about a dozen of them, and friends of the hunters. In their midst was a white prisoner.

It was Old Shadow.

An understanding was at once had between the two parties. Many and dark were the scowls of hatred cast at the old hunter, and a murmur of vengeance was upon every lip.

After some further consultation, one of the late party of savages arose to his feet and addressed the warriors in words of great eloquence. Old Shadow was the subject of his speech, and he proved to be the identical savage that the Avengers had bound upon the back of the horse in the defile of the Iowa bluffs. He recognized Old Shadow as the author of that perilous ride, and called the attention of his friends to his arms and legs, where the thongs had bruised and cut the flesh.

A howl of vengeance burst from the crowd as he concluded his speech, for he was a warrior of no little distinction, and was regarded as the most daring and skillful horseman in the whole tribe.

"Let Swift-Rider say what shall be done with the pale-face villain," said one of the hunting-party.

"Let him be punished by the plan his own brain invented to torture me," replied Swift-Rider, glancing at the young buffalo struggling in his bonds.

A cry of approbation burst from every lip. Even the voice of him who claimed the buffalo acquiesced in the punishment.

"Dod darn yer red pictures!" Old Shadow exclaimed, indignantly, "yer a pack o' wranglin', maw-mouthed dogs and cowardly coyotes! I can lick the hull caboodle o' ye and not ha'f try."

Two or three savages seized him and dragged him rudely toward the buffalo, at the same time uttering terrible threats, in which "scalp-knife" sounded the most ominous to the hunter.

"Wal," he said, "who keers what ye do, ye blubber-heads. Ye needn't make so much noise about a little thing as this."

A blow warned him to keep silent, which he managed to do, but it was more trying to him than the idea of being bound upon the buffalo's back.

He was dragged into the slough and thrown rudely across the animal's back face upward, and his head resting near the beast's shoulders.

His arms were drawn backward in a painful position and firmly lashed with a strong lasso. His legs were bound in a similar manner; then a rope was passed over his breast and around the beast, thus doubly securing him.

After adding a few triumphant taunts and jeers to their cruel work, the ropes that held the young buffalo a captive were severed; then the beast's haunches and sides were pricked with the keen points of knives, and smarting with this inhuman treatment, it struggled to its feet and plunged furiously forward with a bel-low of pain and fear.

A few desperate lunges carried it from the slough onto solid ground. Here, by mad cavorting and leaps it tried to dislodge its rider, but in vain.

A yell of savage triumph burst from the lips of the red-skins, and filled the animal with affright. The next instant it was thundering at a breakneck speed over the prairie, with its helpless human burden.

"By Heaven!" exclaimed the old hunter, "this is a leetle more than I keer about. I'm afraid, Ole Shader, this'll set ye up. But better this way than in the hands of them varlets. Ya-h, buffler! ya-h, have mercy—have feelin', and go easy! I know it's no trubble to tote a ole shader like me—ya-h, buffler, for God's sake, easy!"

But the terrified beast was unconscious of his entreaties for mercy, and with new terror at sound of his voice, it sped on and on.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FEARFUL CHASE.

For a moment the Avengers hesitated, filled with no little surprise and fear. That deep, thunderous noise rolled nearer and nearer, and not until they had heard a savage yell did they discover it was a mighty herd of buffalo being pursued by dusky hunters.

"It is buffalo, boys," said Ralph St. Ledger, "and I'm afraid we're directly in their path."

"Ugh!" ejaculated the Omaha, "there are many buffaio coming, but they will pass us to the west. We are in no danger."

This assertion was found to be correct. The vast herd swept close past them and on away into the darkness that hovered over the great plain.

The prairie fire by this time was coming down rapidly on their left, and blinding volumes of smoke were settling over the plain. No time was to be lost, and so the Avengers swept sharply on.

An hour or more had passed, when suddenly a cry from Omaha's lips brought the party to a stand. The friendly pointed away to the right, where the faint, phosphorescent glimmer of water could just be seen.

The party at once headed toward it, and soon found themselves on the bank of what is known in the language of the prairie as a *buffalo-wallow*. It was a large circular spot, half an acre in extent, and sunk several feet below the level of the plain. At one time it had been full of water, but the hot suns and dry winds had evaporated it until there was but a small pond left in the center of the basin.

This wallow would afford them an admirable retreat from the prairie fire for themselves and animals, and so they at once entered it and rode down as close to the water as possible.

Dismounting, they watered their wearied ponies, then picketed them within the "wallow" by means prepared by their former owners.

They now ascended from the basin to its edge to see what progress the prairie fire was making. It was still over a quarter of a mile away, but a slight breeze was rising and carrying it along quite rapidly.

Nothing could be seen of their late foes. All was silence and gloom save where the fire stretched its lurid length across the plain.

For several minutes the Avengers stood and gazed in silence upon the fire that came steadily on until it was less than a hundred yards from them. Then they turned to retrace their footsteps to the center of the basin, but, at this juncture, a sound broke forth on the stillness of the night.

They stopped and listened. To their ears came a human cry, mingled with the pounding of hoofs upon the plain.

The Avengers seemed rooted to the spot. They listened with blank amazement stamped upon their faces.

Again that human cry wailed out upon the night-air. The ponies in the wallow pricked up their ears and sniffed the air with affright.

"By Heaven! some one is perishing in the flames!" exclaimed Fred Travis, excitedly.

"Hark! I hear hoof-strokes," added St. Ledger.

He had scarcely spoken, when, forth from the darkness into the light of the burning prairie, rushed a fearful sight. It was a black, shaggy mass—a beast whose hooved feet beat loudly upon the plain. It was a solitary buffalo. His eyes were glowing like coals of fire, his nostrils were dilated with terror, his tongue was lolling out, and white foam stood upon his flanks and was flying in flakes from his side. He was mad. He rushed between the Avengers and the fire. He was not over twenty paces from them. They could see the terrible expression of his eyes, and upon his back they saw a human form! They could see it was bound there, and they could see the cords that held it. The light of the burning prairie flared across the upturned face. It was haggard and rendered ghastly in the glare of the flames, yet they recognized it. It was the face of their dear friend, Old Shadow!

"To horse, boys!" cried Death-Notch; "it is Old Shadow! To the rescue!"

Not a word was added. Each man flew to his horse, and in a moment was mounted and in hot pursuit of the buffalo and its helpless rider.

Far over the plain, deep into the labyrinths of darkness, pressed the Avengers, close upon the heels of the maddened buffalo.

The prairie fire was far behind. Only a red glow in the heavens could be seen; and only the moving shadow before them guided the Avengers in their pursuit.

It was a wild, fearful midnight chase.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE INDIAN VILLAGE.

It was daylight, and the morning sun shone from a cloudless sky, bathing the great plains of Nebraska in its golden radiance. A clump of cottonwoods on the banks of the Platte river, which found its way across the plain with the sinuosity of a serpent, was the only object that broke the sameness of that prairie ocean. But, as the morning advanced, a little party of horsemen appeared upon the plain from that clump

of cottonwoods, and heading toward the northwest, rode away at a slow pace.

They were white men, and ten in number. They were the Avengers. In their midst was Old Shadow. He was well and unharmed, and, though somewhat bruised and sore, was as full of life and jollity as ever.

He had been rescued from the buffalo's back by his friends, after a long and painful chase; and now he spoke of the adventure as one of the most perilous of his life on the prairie.

The party was following the trail of the Indians, who it had every reason to believe held Sylvén and Vida captives.

Fred Travis and Death-Notch rode in the rear of the main body. They did not enter into the excitement of their adventures with the same freedom as their companions.

The sweet, fair face of Vida—innocent and child-like in her purity of heart and mind—was ever appealing to the heart of young Travis in captivity and suffering. While to Death-Notch, fear, anxiety and suspense were twofold, because he had both Vida and Sylvén to share his affections and love.

Not one of the Avengers, besides Fred and Omaha, ever mistrusted Ralph St. Ledger of being Death-Notch. Fred had kept the fact a secret from his friends by Ralph's request. In the meantime he had preserved a close watch upon the youth's movements. At times he saw he acted a little strange, but Ralph seemed to be able to control that demon of madness that at times took entire possession of him.

"I have great hopes," said Death-Notch to Fred, as they journeyed on, "that we will come up with the main column of savages soon. At the further extremity of this prairie a range of wooded hills sets in, and in among them I believe the Indians will pitch their lodges."

"In case they do," responded Fred, "it will make our chances of rescuing our friends all the more difficult, will it not?"

"True, Fred; but, when we find our friends are alive and captives, we will have time to calculate our chances of rescuing them. There will be some way to effect their release. If not by stratagem, perhaps we can make a charge into their camp, and then, if we fail," and a smile played about Ralph's lips, "perhaps Death-Notch will make his appearance and help us out."

Fred almost shuddered, but managed to conceal his emotions from Ralph, and said:

"Do you feel as if you were going to have one of your attacks?"

Ralph laughed in a low, pleasant tone.

"Not in the least," he said. "It is no mental debility, Fred, but just the result of an ungovernable passion—an exciting mind and revengeful spirit. You have no doubt seen men laboring under the same spells as I do at times. You have seen them become irritated, and let their passion run away with their judgment, and, while under these fits of madness, they will do things—even commit murder—for they have no control over their actions. This is my case exactly, though I can excite myself into these passions when I try. Yet it takes no effort of my own to make me mad with revenge, when I see before me one of those accursed savages that slew my friends."

"Your hatred of them must be very bitter," said Francis.

"It is, Fred; so much so that I would like to exterminate the whole Sioux race. But I must break myself of this vindictive spirit of revenge and ungovernable passion, or I will never be worthy of the love of Sylvén Gray. But, I never told you why I hate the Sioux so. A few years ago my father was a rich planter in the South, and had a happy, pleasant home. There were three children of us, two girls and a boy. We had received a very liberal education, when father took the 'northern fever,' and concluded to try his fortune on the rich prairies of the North-west. He came up to look at the country, and made known his intention to the few whites he met in the territory. He was encouraged in his intentions by a young man, then a resident of the country, and not only did he extol the advantages of the land, but pointed out to father a beautiful location. But father objected to this on the grounds of its being too near the Indians. To set aside all fears from this source, he took father to the head chief, from whom he received a promise of everlasting friendship. Father came north upon these assurances. He had a large amount of money and stock, which, of course, he brought with him, but no sooner had we become located than the Indians, led by the very white man who had encouraged father's emigration West, attacked our home. Father was slain defending his family. Mother, sister Olive and Vida and myself were taken captive. Olive was a young woman then, but Vida was a little girl. For a long, long time we were kept prisoners, and during that time tongue can not express the hellish torture to which mother and Olive were subjected. The meanest slaves of the South were never treated as they were. Day by day they were made to toil their life away, and I was a witness of it all. But death finally ended their suffering, and, as I gazed down upon their cold, emaciated faces, expressionless in death, then, Travis, I took that oath that made

me Death-Notch, and I believe Heaven justified my course. However, it was a long time before I escaped with Vida from the Indians' stronghold, but when I did, I began my work, and from then dates the working of Death-Notch, the young Scalp-Hunter. In the mean time I met Sylveen Gray and loved her. My love being returned, we met often, though I never went to Stony Cliff. But, now, I feel as though I should give up the life I have been leading, not only for my own sake, but the sake of those who love me."

"Yours has been a hard fate, Ralph, as well as singular," replied Fred; "but I hope you will have no occasion to endanger your life again, and that fate has something better in the future for you than it has had in the past."

"I hope so, too, Fred, but, whenever and wherever I meet that treacherous white villain that betrayed my father to the Indians, he shall die."

"He deserves to, Ralph, if he has not met his just dues ere this."

"No, he has not, unless it has been lately; but what is up now? I see Omaha has dismounted, and is examining the trail."

The two rode up. They found the red scout was examining the trail to ascertain how recently it had been made.

"What do you make of it, Omaha?" asked one.

"It has been made since the dew was on the grass," replied Omaha.

"Then we must be close on the heels o' the sneakin' varlets," said Old Shadow; "so let's spur up, boys, and git along a leetle faster, for I want to git to liftin' h'ar, so I do."

"Take it easy, Shadow," said young Carter; "we'll catch up with them soon enough."

The party rode on until they struck the range of the hill spoken of by Ralph, about sunset. Here they encamped, and on the following morning scouts were thrown out.

They soon returned with the surprising information that Inkpaducah and his tribes had pitched their lodges in a deep valley, about two miles away. This decided the future course of the Avengers, and they at once moved to a place of concealment, covering their trail as best they could. Remaining hidden until darkness again set in, the whole party then set off toward the Indian village, guided by Omaha.

From a commanding point they were enabled to see into the new town, that was lighted up with numerous glowing camp-fires.

The location was a good one, affording many natural defenses. A high escarpment of rugged hills encircled it on three sides, cutting off approach from these points.

On the fourth side the river guarded the approach to the valley, yet there were narrow passages between the river and hills, giving access to the valley. But these passages the wily old chief had doubly guarded, and he rested under the self-assurance that he had at last found a retreat in which he need have no fears of an enemy, however strong.

The almost impregnable situation of the village impressed itself upon the minds of the Avengers, and filled them with a feeling akin to despair.

Hundreds of camp-fires showed them the interior of the camp. Warriors were stalking about as if to familiarize themselves with their new village; children played in groups here and there, while the squaws—the slaves of the great warriors—were busy with their usual drudgery.

The Avengers strained their eyes for a sight of their captive friends. They saw nothing but a few white men, and these they knew were renegades, for they enjoyed all the liberties of the camp.

"I see no captives, nor chance for us, boys," said Amos Meredith.

"There must be a chance for us," replied Ralph St. Leger; "we must make a chance, if our friends we find are prisoners in that encampment. If they are, we must release them at all hazards; but if they are not, and have been slain, I shudder to think what will follow at my hands."

"And ours, too," said several of the Avengers.

The little band continued its reconnaissance for some time, then they returned to the place where they had left their horses. Here they spent the remainder of the night, and on the following morning began a *detour* around the village to find an entrance to the valley.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PHANTOM HORSEMEN.

OLD INKPADUCAH was at last safe with his tribe, so he thought. He had long before heard of the natural advantages of this valley for an encampment, and growing uneasy under the punishments that threatened him in the Territory of Iowa, he had taken up his line of march for this valley, which he found equaled in every respect the reports he had heard of it.

Through the center of the village a little stream found its way, while along the base of the hills was a belt of shrubbery and rich, succulent grass that furnished good pasturage for their animals, so they had only to secure game for food.

The escarpment of the hills that partially sur-

rounded the village ran high above the tops of the forest trees and was outlined against the sky like the summit of some grim old battlement. A bird could not move athwart its summit without being seen by those in the valley below.

On the second night after their entrance to the valley, the head men of the tribe were assembled in council near the center of the town. They had met simply for congratulation—to rejoice and talk over their new and impregnable defense, and the glory that seemed opening to the tribe, in their escape from their hated enemies and from the terrible Death-Notch.

Foremost in the council was Le Subtile Fox, who, as the reader has no doubt already inferred, was Pirate Paul, though he went disguised. His words still seemed to have great weight in their council, and he was now listened to as one possessed of the powers of prophecy; for once he had told them that the day would soon come when they would be forever free from the persecutions of their enemies in a beautiful valley far away, and although they now believed they were in that valley, Le Subtile Fox had reference in his prophecy to the valley of Death, where their enemies seemed fast hurrying them.

"When does the white chief return to the village of the pale-faces?" asked Inkpaducah of the pirate.

"I shall go soon," replied Le Subtile Fox.

"And what will you do with the white squaw that calls you husband?"

"Leave her in your care," replied the villain.

The chief was about to reply, when a low exclamation without the tent arrested their attention.

They arose from their seats and hurried out the lodge. The moon was up and shining bright.

"What is the cause of this commotion?" Pirate Paul asked of the sentinel on guard at the door of the council-lodge.

"Look there!" replied the sentinel, pointing away toward the summit of the escarpment to the northward of the town.

Every eye was turned in the direction indicated, and along the crest of the hills that were outlined against the clear, starry sky, they beheld a single horseman riding at a wild, furious speed. They could hear the clear, sharp ring of each hoof-stroke upon the stony path. They could see the flashing of a spear-head in the moonlight. They could see the horseman's tall plumes nodding about his head and naked shoulders, and from these they knew he was a friend.

The watchers in the valley permitted their eyes to follow him along the ridge until it dipped down below the dark horizon.

Then they awaited his coming. He came soon. He was terribly excited, and his beast was white with foam and in the last stages of exhaustion.

"Why, Ahlah, ride so fast?" asked Le Subtile Fox, as he drew rein near the council-lodge.

"Ahlah," replied the Indian, "has seen terrible things. The village of the Sioux is in the valley of the Hobbamoeko. Look yonder!"

The savages looked in the direction indicated, and saw a number of horsemen appear in sight. They were riding, or, as it seemed, floating along the summit of the escarpment.

The savages stood awe-stricken, terrified. There was something unearthly in the appearance of these horsemen. The hoof-strokes of their animals gave forth no sound, while both horse and rider seemed like beings of giant proportions—like Titan phantoms galloping through the air. Had their horses' hoofs produced the least sound, they might have believed they were of earth; but the absence of sound, when they had heard the hoof-strokes of their friend's horse so sharply, and the colossal proportions of both man and beast, were enough to fill every heart with misgivings.

The savages watched the strange apparitions gallop along the heights in silence; then, as they dropped from view against the dark horizon, there followed a silence equal to that of death. But it was soon broken by a low cry that wailed out, striking every heart with terror. The sound came from the north side of the town, and as the terrors of the moment subsided—when the last of the phantom-giants had faded into darkness—other sounds were heard issuing from the same side of the village, and soon a low cry was raised that ran from mouth to mouth, and the name Death-Notch quivered in accents of terror on every lip!

Then came a runner to the council-lodge with the startling news that Death-Notch had been in the village and had slain a warrior.

The chiefs shuddered with terror, and Le Subtile Fox grew uneasy with a strange fear. Their supposed security and freedom from that terrible young Scalp Hunter was, after all, a vain hope, and he was still haunting their trail.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A PIPE OF PEACE.

BACK in the woods some two miles from the Indian village, was a large tree whose branching

boughs and pendent creepers gave it more the appearance of a huge *banyan* than an oak.

Numerous parasites, such as the wild grape-vine, wild cucumber, and wild ivy, had scrambled up the trunk of the tree, and creeping out upon the branches to their extremities had inclined downward to the earth again, thus forming a curtain of green foliage around the tree, and an inclosure of several yards in diameter. This inclosure presented the interior appearance of a huge pavilion, the tree-trunk representing the central pole.

Within the walls of this natural inclosure were grouped seven persons. They sat before a small fire whose light revealed their faces and the expressions of anxiety upon them. It was a party of our friends, the Avengers.

Two of the band stood on guard outside of their retreat: these were Omaha and Old Shadow. In the background stood nine horse-brided and saddled, and their dripping flanks told that they had been ridden hard and fast and that quite recently. Their hoofs were muffled in pieces of woolen blankets, that were wrapped around and under the hoofs, and confined at the pastern.

All the Avengers were present except Ralph St. Leger, and for him they now waited. He had gone to the village of the Sioux to make a reconnaissance, and learn, if possible, whether Vida and Sylveen were held captives there.

The night was far advanced when he returned. His face, as he appeared before his companions, wore an expression of sadness and disappointment which Fred Travis readily interpreted to himself.

"You are back safe, young friend," said Amos Meredith, as Ralph made his appearance under the oak.

"I believe so," replied St. Leger, with a smile.

"Did you succeed in getting into the Indian village?" asked another.

"Yes; I spent all of half an hour wandering about in the place without detection."

"Doggoned wonder ye didn't git yerself set up, with a dig in the ribs," remarked Old Shadow.

"I would not have stood much chance had the Indians not been so busy watching the phantom horsemen."

"Phantom horsemen? What do you mean?"

"The horsemen that galloped with muffled hoofs along the ridge."

"You allude to us?"

"Yes. The savages saw you riding along the rocky heights and became terror-stricken. I see you myself, and I must admit you presented wonderful appearance. Outlined against the sky, you seemed magnified into beings ten-fold your size, and as the muffled hoofs of your horses produced no sound, you appeared like giant phantoms in the air; and it was a fortunate occurrence for me, for I was getting into pretty close quarters about that time."

A low, silent laugh followed Ralph's story. The Avengers had ridden along the ridge in order to reach the point where they now were. They had muffled their animals' feet that the sounds of their hoofs would not be heard, never once dreaming of being brought out so prominently against the sky to the savages' eyes.

"Well," said Fred Travis, burning with impatience to hear from his darling Vida, "what discovery did you make? Are they—the girls—there?"

Ralph bit his lips, as if to keep back some inward emotion. For a moment he was silent, then he replied:

"No, they are not there."

The features of young Travis became clouded with disappointment, and for a moment a death-like silence pervaded the place.

Death-Notch was the first to speak.

"No; Vida and Sylveen are not there. But there are other white female captives there, and among them is a young woman whom I have seen at Stony Cliff, and whom Sylveen called Martha Gregory. The others are no doubt captives taken at the Spirit Lake Massacre, and of whom you and your friends are in search."

"No doubt of it! no doubt of it!" exclaimed several of the Avengers, and the muttered words of sister, mother, or friend, might have been heard spoken in whispered accents.

The youths were free in expressing hopes of the speedy release of their friends. But how were they to do it? This was the question that passed from lip to lip without an answer.

There was not a doubt in the minds of Death-Notch and Fred but that Vida and Sylveen had been slain. If not, where were they? There was nothing that admitted of a hope of their having escaped from their captors, and a new spirit of vengeance seemed to have fired the hearts of both the youths. Still they did not give way to despair entirely. They thought the maidens might possibly have been hidden away somewhere, or that Ralph had missed them in the village; and, after some deliberation as to their future course, they came to a conclusion that was likely, if successful, to give them some information. It was to release Martha Gregory and learn from her whether Sylveen and Vida had been taken captives by Inkpaducah's warriors; if so, she could give some clew to their absence.

But the great difficulty would be in effecting Miss Gregory's release. It would be impossible for them to gain admission to the valley; however, they resolved to wait and watch their chances.

They spent the remainder of that night under that great, green pavilion of nature, and the following morning, at an early hour, they were in the saddle, and moving further away from the Indian village, for daylight would undoubtedly reveal their present location to the enemy.

A few miles north of the Indian town, the forest ended in a long expanse of prairie. The Avengers had just reached this plain, and were about debouching from the forest into it, when they made a discovery that caused them to draw rein instantly. Over two hundred Indian warriors were encamped on the edge of the prairie, not over thirty rods from them.

A single glance told our friends it was a war-party. Their horses were picketed near by, and their spears were aligned in a circle about their camp.

The hour was still that of early morn, and it was evident from their movements that the savages were preparing to move. They were dressed and painted in all the paraphernalia of the war-path, and were all young and athletic-looking warriors. But they were not Sioux. There were those among our friends that could distinguish the warriors of three distinct tribes, the Omaha, the Sac and Fox tribes.

For fear of discovery, Fred Travis enjoined extreme silence upon his friends, but Omaha, seeing who the strangers were, heeded not this caution. Giving his animal the reins, he galloped from the woods and rode directly toward the enemy's camp, manifesting signs of friendship as he did so.

"By thunder, that red younker 'll git the hull caboodle into trubble!" exclaimed Old Shadow.

"Let us see what he means," added Travis.

The Avengers remained under cover of the woods, watching in breathless anxiety the result of Omaha's conference.

The friendly rode into their camp, and was soon surrounded by the warriors. A short consultation ensued, when a shout from the lips of the savages pealed out on the air. It was a welcome shout, and our friends knew Omaha had been received as a friend.

A moment later Omaha wheeled his horse, and riding back to where his companions awaited him, said:

"Let my white friends have no fear of the warriors yonder. They are our friends and the enemies of the Sioux, and are marching upon their village. They will help the Avengers to rescue their friends."

The whites would have doubted the motives of the warriors had it been reported to them by any other than Omaha. But the friendly was a tried friend, and they knew that no subtle cunning or treachery of the red-skins could circumvent him, and, with a shout of joy and thankfulness for such timely friendship, the little band rode from the woods and approached the red-skins' camp with open hands, significant of peace.

They were received in camp with no little ceremony of honor, taking it in an Indian view, and were welcomed with prolonged shouts.

The Avengers dismounted. Then the pipe of peace was brought out and smoked, and peace and friendship between the two parties were established.

A conference was now held, Omaha representing our friends and the leader of the savages the three tribes under his command. The rescue of their friends by the one party, and vengeance by the other, were the motives that had brought them there, yet they pledged themselves to work together.

When the conference broke up it was with the understanding that they were to attack the Sioux village the coming night; and that the position of the enemy's camp, and the passage leading into the valley, might be thoroughly understood, a scout from each party was sent out to make a reconnaissance of the topography of the valley.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ATTACK.

NIGHT again fell over the land. The moon was not yet up, for it was early. Camp-fires dotted, like twinkling stars, the dark valley in which was located the village of Inkpaducah. Tall, dusky figures went stalking about the camp, wrapped in blankets and robes. Others reclined in groups about the fires, smoking and talking. They did not feel entirely secure here in that valley, which seemed to have been created for their especial favor. They had not forgotten the phantom horsemen of the night previous, nor that Death-Notch had been in their camp and slain a warrior.

Double guards had been posted around the valley, and every point of approach made, as they believed, impregnable.

As the hours wore on, a number of the warriors sought their couches, while others sat about the waning camp-fires and talked and sung, in a wild, riotous manner.

Suddenly they were startled by a sound. It

was the sound of a human voice, and it was a white man's voice. It was within the valley, and was approaching their camp. How an enemy could have gained admission to their stronghold unseen, was a mystery to the savages.

They bent their ears and listened. The voice was coming nearer, and they could hear that it was singing a sprightly air. There were whites among the savages, who had heard that voice before, and recognized the words he was singing. They ran thus:

"The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,
At the ole hedgehog, the ole hedgehog;
The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,
Way down by the Squantum river."

Then from the gloom beyond the radius of the camp-fires issued a long, cadaverous-looking white man, whose rapid strides soon carried him into the midst of the astonished red-skins.

"Hullo, my beauties!" exclaimed the bold intruder, with apparent indifference; "how goes it, ennyhow? Dull times out here in Nebraska, ain't it? Skulps and whisky are purty skeerse, I trow, eh, lovelies?"

The savages sprung to their feet and flocked around the daring pale-face, giving vent to various exclamations of curiosity and mistrust.

"Stand a leetle back, here, idiots!" yelled the old hunter, as they gathered too close about him to feel at ease; "did ye ever see a white gentleman afore? I'm not a seahoss, nor a Bengolly tiger, but I'm Old Shader, Esquire, and I'll flit across yer vision, fust thing ye know, ye gapin' knaves."

"Ugh!" ejaculated an Indian; "ole rattle-tongue—heep talk—no sense."

"Be cautious, red-skin, how ye handle yer words, or I'll spot ye. I'm here on bisness, and I don't want to idle words with you common herd. Trot out yer ole chief, as I wish to give him a bit o' advice."

"Waugh! the chief is here," said Inkpaducah, pushing his way through the circle of savages and confronting the old hunter with a haughty scowl. "Let the pale-face say what he has to say."

"Whew! A little crusty!" ejaculated the hunter, softly; "but then, ole hoss, I'm here on bisness. I hear you have got some white captives here; some you took at Spirit Lake, and some at other places."

"What is that to the pale-face?" demanded the chief.

"I want 'em, and now if ye'll jist trot 'em out and let us leave in harm'ny, why, I'll say no more 'bout it, and ye'll save ye're ole hide o' gittin' a hole punched through it, mebby."

A contemptuous smile swept over the face of the chief, and there was a vindictive gleam in every savage eye.

"The pale-face is a fool," returned the chief, "to think that Inkpaducah will accede to his demands. Not even the pale-face hunter shall ever leave our village alive."

"Bah! Git out; ye're laborin' under an orful mistake. Unless ye release the hull kit o' prisoners in yer hands, be they red or be they white, and that within ten minutes, your village will run red with blood, and scalps will fly like snow-flakes, now mind ye."

"The pale-face speaks as though he was a host."

"I am a tough ole coon, Inky, and can whallop, at least, half a dozen sich ole rats as you are, but then, my ole dear, I've over two hundred friends waitin', this blessed minit, to open fire on your little burg."

"The pale-face's tongue is crooked; he lies."

"That's it!" ejaculated the hunter. "I allers hev the luck o' gittin' called a crooked-tongue, in spite o' my great regard fur the trooth; but then, I never have swallered the lie, nor, be cussed, if I will!"

As the last two words fell from the old hunter's lips, his fist was planted fair between the chief's eyes. The red-skin fell to the earth as though he had been shot, while a cry of triumph, that was almost deafening, pealed from the old hunter's lips.

Then, from out the darkness along the base of the hills, within the village, arose another yell, that was mingled with the crash of fire-arms and the flutter of over two hundred pairs of feet, as they came swarming into the village.

Old Shadow's words had proven true. The enemies of the Sioux, the Omahas, the Sacs, the Foxes, and the Spirit Lake Avengers, were upon them.

The Sioux were taken completely by surprise, but they soon recovered from the first shock, and gave battle, and then began a terrible struggle in the very heart of the village.

The eight Avengers stood together, and, side by side, fought their way to the prison-lodge. Here ensued a sanguinary struggle, but the whites and their red friends were victorious, and succeeded in forcing their way into the lodge.

They found several captives therein, one of whom was Martha Gregory. The others were all young women, and the affecting scene that followed the entrance of the Avengers into the lodge, told that their coming had not been in vain, for there most of them found a captive

friend. However, there were but a few short moments in which to exchange words of love and greeting; but, in the meantime, Death-Notch learned from the lips of Martha Gregory that Vida and Sylveen had not been captives there at all—that they were not in the village.

With crushed hopes and bleeding heart, Ralph bade his companions follow him with their friends, and they at once began their retreat from the village. The allied savage forces were gradually pressing the Sioux back toward the eastern side of the town, therefore our white friends had but little difficulty in gaining the cover of the forest on the western side of the place, making their exit from the valley through a narrow defile which the Sioux guards had deserted to join in battle.

Here those of the Avengers that had found friends, were enabled to obtain a few minutes' talk with each other.

"And you are sure, Miss Gregory," said Fred Travis, "that Sylveen Gray has not been in this village?"

"I am certain of it," replied Martha; "the last I saw of Sylveen was on the night I was captured."

Fred groaned in spirit, and turning to Death-Notch, said:

"Ralph, I am afraid Sylveen and Vida have been slain."

Ralph made no reply, but the silence that followed told that he was terribly agitated, and for a moment Fred was afraid he could not restrain his emotions.

The conflict lasted several moments in the village. The Sioux, however, were finally driven from their stronghold and compelled to seek refuge among the rocks and undergrowth at the base of the hills on the east side of the village, where the women and children had already gone.

The allied victors now fired the wigwams, and with a number of horses, several prisoners and some plunder, they began their retreat from the valley, guided by the light of the burning town.

The victory had been a decisive one, and forever broke the power of Inkpaducah. And the allied tribes felt that their disaster of a few months previous had been nobly avenged, and with their prisoners and plunder, at once set off on their homeward journey.

The night of the battle, however, the eight Avengers camped in the forest with their red friends, and on the following morning they separated, each party taking its own course.

The Avengers turned their footsteps toward Stony Cliff, most of them feeling happy over the rescue of their friends. Fred Travis and Ralph St. Leger, however, were sad at heart. They feared, and in fact every thing went to confirm their fears, that the objects of their hearts had been slain; yet they entertained a faint hope that the girls might have escaped and returned to Stony Cliff. If not, they must have perished in the woods.

At noon the party made a few minutes' halt. Travis and St. Leger stood aside talking about Sylveen and Vida, for they were never out of their minds a minute, and the agony of fear and suspense was growing upon them. They became restless in spirit and mind. Their conversation was finally interrupted by the approach of Martha Gregory, who asked a moment's conversation with them. It being readily granted, she asked:

"When did you last see Sylveen and Vida, Mr. St. Leger?"

Ralph told her, and on learning that they had been together after her—Martha's—capture, a suspicion entered her mind in an instant.

"Then," she said, "if your cabin was attacked on the night of their disappearance, I am satisfied the Indians never took them. I have a suspicion of where they are, if alive."

"Where? where?" exclaimed the youths.

"In the den of Pirate Paul!"

A cry of bitter agony burst from their lips. They would much rather have known the girls were captives in the power of the Indians than in power of the robbers.

"Then they are lost?" exclaimed young Travis, "for the den of Pirate Paul, you know, has baffled all our attempts to find it. St. Leger, this is awful, torturing, agonizing. What shall we do?"

"Search for them, Travis—search, until we are gray."

"You need have no uneasiness, young men, in regard to the whereabouts of Pirate Paul's den. Within an hour after we reach Stony Cliff, I will lead you into his den!"

"You are jesting, surely jesting, Miss Gregory!" exclaimed Fred, half-hopefully.

"I am not. I have been within the robber's den. I have kept its location a secret for reasons of my own. But, I shall do so no longer."

"Then there is some hopes of saving them yet," said St. Leger, "if poor little Vida has not fretted her life away."

"God grant that they are both alive and unharmed, Ralph! But, let us not tarry here too long. Every moment may be of great importance."

The next minute, almost, they were mounted and moving at a rapid pace over the great, green ocean of prairie.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ROBBERS' HIDDEN RANCHE IS FOUND.

THE retreat of Inkpaducah and his warriors from the valley of the Sioux, gave the settlers of Stony Cliff some assurance of future peace; not only from the savages, but also from the robbers, who would now have no immediate source of protection when closely pressed, nor succor in time of need—when a large settlement or emigrant train was to be plundered.

The greatest sorrow, however, had fallen upon the settlement in consequence of the mysterious disappearance of Sylveen Gray and Martha Gregory.

The settlers had not a doubt but that the girls had been captured and carried away by the Indians, but every attempt toward rescuing them had proved unavailing. At last Scott Shirely and several of his hunter employees in the fur business volunteered to go in search of them. They went, and, after several days' absence, returned without any tidings of the missing maidens. But had the honest-hearted settlers once suspected that Scott Shirely was Pirate Paul, and that his employees were his followers, they would have also suspected them of spiriting the maidens away, instead of returning them. But they never dreamed that such an apparent gentleman as Scott Shirely could be guilty of such wickedness, for he had worked his ropes so cunningly and quietly that there was no opening for any suspicion.

Elated over their success in thus deceiving the settlers, Shirely and his men grew less fearful of their den being discovered.

On the night following that of Pirate Paul's departure from the Indian village, the robbers were in their den, drinking freely and talking over their late adventures. But there were several vacant chairs in the ranche. Death had been in the ranks of the freebooters since we last saw them in council in their stronghold.

They wore no masks, for they no longer entertained fears of any one happening into their ranche, and recognizing them before they could make their escape.

"Well," said Pirate Paul, "our four friends that were slain during our expedition were good boys, and I feel the loss of them greatly. But, then, we have made the settlers believe that they fell in the search for the girls, and so, after all, we have gained something by their death. It is a good thing, too, that we got rid of that Martha Gregory, or she would have blowed us higher than Gilderoy's kite."

"Who was she, anyhow, Cap?" asked one of his men.

"Well, she thinks she is my wife. I got an old humbug of a preacher to go through the ceremony when I was over in Canada. The little fool thought it was all right, but when I got tired of her, I dropped her into the St. Lawrence river, and supposed I was entirely rid of her, and, as her husband, that I would inherit the vast little fortune to which I knew she was heir. But, the old saying of a bad penny returning, has been verified in my case. However, I think she is safe now where she will give me no further trouble. It appears that El Pardou, the chap we came Death-Notch on, was a cousin of hers, and a spy upon our track."

"Good thing we hung the traitor when we did," said Griff Morton.

"Yes; and the settlers believe to this day that Death-Notch slew him," said Finchly, the spy.

"Well, let's try and keep them thinkin' so; but wouldn't I give a land title in Jerusalem to know who Death-Notch is," said another.

"You may know, to your sorrow, soon enough, old fellow," laughed Pirate Paul; "but I am satisfied as to who Death-Notch is. In the first place, he is the son of that rich fellow that came from the south about two or three years ago, and whom I succeeded in getting into the clutches of old Inkpaducah. You know, after I got him into the country, I took a number of Indians and captured the whole family. The old man we killed, but the mother, two daughters and a son we carried captives to the village. The mother and her oldest daughter the Indians worked to death, and the youngest girl and the son they adopted. But after awhile they escaped, and that boy I believe is Death-Notch, and the lord of the little hut, where we first saw that dark-eyed girl that played on the guitar. They have grown older and changed considerable since I last saw them, but then I know they are the children of that Southerner, Homer St. Leger. I suppose the boy has determined to wreak vengeance on those that spoilt their fun in the north, but—"

"He seems to be doing it, too," interrupted one of the robbers.

"Yes; I reckon, however, he has forgotten the face of Le Subtile Fox, for I was disguised then. I wish now I had the ring I took from his mother, and gave to that young baby-face, Martha Gregory, as she calls herself. It was a very costly ring, and would look very nice on the snowy finger of her daughter whom I propose to wed."

"Hist!" suddenly exclaimed one of the robbers: "I was sure I heard a footstep."

"Fancy, fancy, Finchly," said Pirate Paul; "you're getting nervous."

"I tell you I *did* hear a footstep!"

"Then search the cavern," replied the captain.

Finchly arose to obey, and while he is engaged in his search, let us change the scene for a few minutes to another point.

CHAPTER XL.

WITHIN THE ROBBERS' DEN.

ON the same night that the robbers were in their den in consultation, a party of nearly twenty persons went into camp on the banks of the Sioux river, about five miles above Stony Cliff.

It was the eight Avengers and the friends they had rescued from the Indians. They could easily have reached the settlement that night by a little after dark, but they had no desire to do so. They had a mission to perform under cover of that night—before it became known in the village that Martha Gregory was safe.

Their horses being secured, and two of the Avengers left to take care of the females, the rest of the men, guided by Martha Gregory, set off down the river toward Stony Cliff.

They traveled on in silence, and when the village appeared in sight on the bluffs outlined against the southern sky they came to a halt.

A scout was now sent forward to make some reconnaissance, and in the course of half an hour he returned.

"How is it, Omaha—all quiet?"

"Yes, the settlers are asleep. No one is abroad."

"Then we may as well continue our journey," said Miss Gregory.

And so they moved on, and soon entered a narrow foot-path that wound along the river bank at the base of the bluffs. It was a difficult path to follow in the dark, but, by carefully picking their footsteps, they finally found themselves opposite the village, and in the pathway leading up the acclivity from the river to the cabins.

"Now which way, Miss Gregory?" asked Death-Notch.

"A few steps further on," was the woman's response; "but we can not reach the place on account of that projecting ledge. But there are two canoes that we can use."

The canoes were unfastened and the little party at once entered them. They then turned down the stream, and running around a projecting point of the bank, turned in shore again and landed.

Martha again took the lead, and with the assistance of the vines and bushes that grew from the face of the cliff, the party began ascending the acclivity. Up about fifty feet from the water's edge they came to a halt on a narrow table-rock.

Long parasites and moss hung like a curtain down the face of the cliff above them. Martha Gregory parted this curtain at a certain point and said:

"There, gentlemen, is one of the entrances to the den of Pirate Paul."

"By Heaven!" exclaimed Travis, in an undertone, "then it is directly under Stony Cliff!"

"Yes," replied Martha, "and the main entrance—the one at which the robbers usually enter—is in the very heart of the village. It is under the large building occupied by the fur company. A trap-door in the cabin opens into that passage!"

"This beats me!" said St. Leger; "it is strange the settlers never found it out. But I feel satisfied now the girls are in this den."

"We will soon know. Follow me," said Martha Gregory.

"Are you sure you understand the place?"

"Perfectly. My friend, El Pardou, showed me all through the place once when the robbers were away."

"Then lead the way, and we will follow."

Martha glided into the dark opening, closely followed by the Avengers.

In her hand the guide carried a piece of fungus or decayed wood—known in border lore as fox-fire—whose dull glow enabled her companions to follow on without difficulty.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE CONFLICT IN THE CAVERN.

THE robbers sat motionless and silent, waiting the return of the man sent to search the cavern. Fear had suddenly taken possession of them all. There was something strangely foreboding of danger in the very atmosphere around them. But they breathed easier when they saw their scout returning, and had heard him report "all right."

"Only fancy—weak nerves," said Pirate Paul, though he had been as deeply imbued with fear as any of his men.

"No," Finchly still persisted, "I would have sworn that I heard a footstep—ah! there it is again! There is some one in this cavern besides ourselves!"

True enough, all heard the footstep this time. There was no fancy about it. They turned their eyes in the direction from whence the sound emanated, and saw a human form emerge from the darkness. It was the form of a woman. A shawl was thrown hoodlike over her head, but, as she advanced, this was permitted to drop to her shoulders, and the face and form

of Martha Gregory stood before the astonished robbers.

"Woman or devil, whichever you be, is it possible you are here?" exclaimed Pirate Paul. "It is possible, my truant Pirate Paul. Nor is it the first time that I have been within your den."

"But, by heavens, it shall be the last time!" roared the indignant robber chief; "you have dogged my footsteps long enough. You shall not leave this ranche alive. I will sink a knife into your heart, instead of sinking you in the St. Lawrence."

"You threaten me, base, cowardly wretch. You tried to murder me once, villain, and—"

"Yes, and I will not be a fool again. I will do my work better this time. Men, seize her!"

The robbers started toward her.

"Back, cowards!" she fairly hissed, and there was something so terrible in the look she flashed upon them, that caused them to recoil.

"Seize her, seize her, I say!" yelled Pirate Paul; "do not let her escape."

But the men still refused to obey his commands. The robber chief grew wild with indignation and fury, and drawing a pistol, he leveled it at Martha's breast. But he never had time to pull the trigger. The combined report of eight rifles rolled in awful reverberations through the chambers of the cavern, and Pirate Paul fell dead, as did also three or four of his men. Then, from the darkness of the cavern rushed the Avengers with a yell that drove terror to the hearts of the surviving robbers, who, like hunted beasts, fled hither and thither through the cavern, pursued by the Avengers.

The crack of pistols, the groans and shrieks of the dying and the triumphant shouts of the victors rolled in deafening intonations from chamber to chamber of the great subterranean vault.

But the conflict lasted for only a few minutes. The robbers were all slain or driven from the cavern, terror-stricken. When the conflict had ended, the Avengers gathered around the robbers' card-table, whereon burned a lamp.

"What next, boys?" asked Amos Meredith, elated with victory.

"Let us search for Vida St. Leger and Sylveen Gray," replied Fred Travis. "Miss Gregory, where is that prison-room you spoke of? Lead us to it."

Martha took up the light and bade the Avengers follow. As she moved away, she passed the lifeless body of him whom she had once called husband. He lay upon his back, his face upturned. She paused, glanced at it, and then, as a sigh, that almost deepened into a sob, issued from her lips, she moved on.

After traversing several chambers of the cavern, their further progress was suddenly disputed by a heavy wooden door.

A cry of joy burst from the lips of Ralph St. Leger.

"That must be the door of their prison," he said.

"It is the door of the prison," added Martha.

Ralph beat upon the heavy door with his fist and called in frantic tones the name of his sister.

A voice was heard within. It was Vida's voice. She had recognized the tones of her half-distracted brother.

"Sister—Vida, is it you?" he cried.

"Yes, we are here, brother—Sylveen and I."

"Oh, it is Ralph!" the lover heard Sylveen exclaim.

"Lend a helping hand, friends," cried Ralph; "let us burst down the door!"

There was something unearthly in the youth's eyes. Fred Travis saw it and knew that that demon of madness was seizing upon him. But they all pressed upon the door.

It yielded, and burst inward.

There, in a brilliantly-lighted and well-furnished room, were Vida and Sylveen. Like captive birds fluttering forth from their prison-cage into the air, so the maidens rushed from their prison-room to meet Ralph and Fred.

The angelic faces of the maidens stayed the storm that was rising within the breast of Death-Notch. His heart was overcome with the emotions of joy, and he clasped his sister and sweet-heart alternately to his breast.

From the lips of the maidens the Avengers soon learned how they came to be there, in the robbers' den. After their capture at the cabin, the Indians turned them over to the robbers, who brought them there under cover of night.

"And I must say for the robbers," added Sylveen, "that, although we have been held captives, we have been treated kindly and with respect, but how long this would have lasted I know not."

"Not much longer," said Martha Gregory. "for Pirate Paul has been away from here since your capture, until to-night."

"Then, thank God, our arrival is opportune!" said young Travis.

Sylveen and Martha greeted each other with the fondness of sisters, and, after greetings had been exchanged all around, Martha took the lamp, and said:

"Now follow me, my dear friends, and I will conduct you from this fearful place."

She did not go the way they had entered, but followed a passage leading in an entirely opposite direction, and soon came to a flight of stone steps. Up these steps she led the way, but a

trap-door at the top suddenly disputed their further ascent.

Martha showed the men how it was opened, and they proceeded to work. It required several moments to remove a combination of bolts and bars, when the door was swung downward on iron hinges.

The party now ascended through this aperture, and found themselves on the floor of a large log building—the head-quarters of the robbers, who concealed their real character under the guise of fur-agents and traders.

The party tarried but a few moments in the cabin, and on issuing therefrom, found themselves in the heart of Stony Cliff, whose honest settlers were all fast asleep.

The party, however, soon made their presence known to the settlers, and the whole village was quickly astir, filled with joy and surprise—joy over the rescue of Sylveen and Martha, and surprise over the discovery of Scott Shirely being Pirate Paul, and that his den was within their very midst.

Omaha and Old Shadow were sent out after those left in camp up the river, and when they returned with the female friends of the Avengers, they were welcomed to the hospitality of the place, and cared for with all that kindness characteristic of the honest-hearted men and women of the border. And the Avengers, one and all, as well as their friends, were made to feel at ease and at home.

Two weeks passed, and found them still at the village, resting and preparing for a journey to— they scarcely knew where.

But these two weeks were fraught with great interest, joy and happiness to the sojourners at Stony Cliff. Fred Travis and Vida renewed their love vows, walked in the cool forest aisles, rowed upon the river, and talked and sung as though their young hearts had never felt the pangs of grief, nor bitterness of despair.

Nor were Ralph St. Leger and Sylveen Gray less happy in each other's society—the cheerful light of each other's eyes and the music of each other's voice.

And there were other joyous hearts besides. There were lovers in that little band of Avengers, and sweethearts were among those rescued from the Indians, and theirs was a love strengthened by long months of cruel separation, despair and suffering. If to them the night had been dark, the morning was all the more radiant.

Sylveen Gray was greatly surprised, if not a little horror-stricken, when she learned that her lover was the terrible being, Death-Notch; but when she as well as the settlers had learned the cause of his vengeance, and that he was not so terrible as was reputed, they could not censure him for the course he had pursued, in wreaking retribution on the agents of his sorrow.

Ralph did not, however, tell them of the great state of semi-consciousness under which most of his terrible deeds had been performed. But, by keeping aloof from the war-path, and in the presence of his adored Sylveen, he effectually overcame that terrible passion of mad revenge, which was proof of itself, that it came of no physical or mental debility, but of a highly excitable temperament that had been cultivated in its freaks, instead of being restrained.

One thing, however, stands yet to be explained in connection with Death-Notch. It will be remembered that, on the night of the storm at the solitary hut in the forest, he drew from the bosom of his hunting-shirt a flattened bullet, which had evidently been aimed at his heart by a lurking foe; and also when taken prisoner by the savages, near his own cabin, how the inhuman foe sought to torture him by shooting burning arrows into his breast, and how he bore this torture with unflinching fortitude. The whole secret of this wonderful fortitude was this: beneath his hunting-shirt he wore a steel jacket, made something like the coat of mail worn by the warriors of the Middle Ages. This jacket had once been his father's; the latter had once been a member of a secret organization in the South, and the steel jacket and iron mask worn by Ralph, and to which his life was owing on more than one occasion, were a part of the regalia worn by that secret order.

Thus the mysteries connected with Death-Notch stand explained, which were no mysteries after all.

CHAPTER XLII.

THREE YEARS AFTER.

It was early morning, when a band of eight persons, habited as hunters, stood beneath the umbrageous shadows of a great forest oak.

They were all young men, yet the faces of some were overgrown with heavy beards, and others were just "sporting" their first mustache, and one of them was beardless and bronzed, but he was an Indian.

These men were the bone and muscle, if you will accept the term, of the flourishing little settlement of Fairview. They were away from home then on a few days' hunt, enjoying a holiday from the field and plow.

We have met with these persons before, dear reader, yet we can scarcely recognize in those stern, bearded, manly faces, the once almost boyish features of the Spirit Lake Avengers. But it has only required three years to effect this

change, for they were just emerging into manhood when we first saw them upon the trail of the red-man.

But, three years have wrought wonderful changes in the lives of these young men, and as they now stand there in the great forest under the oak, ready to take up their homeward march, one of their number suddenly exclaims:

"By George, boys! don't you remember this very spot and this very tree?"

All gaze around them, and a light of recognition beams in every eye.

"Yes," says Fred Travis, "it is the very tree under which I called the roll of the Lake Avengers three years ago."

"Thru' ye are," Squire Travis; and right here we stood when we heard, for the first time, the cry of one ave. Death-Notch's victims," says Phelix O'Ray.

"What changes time has brought to us all," replies Travis; "it seems impossible that, after three years of constant dangers almost, we are all permitted to meet here together again. It is—"

The sentence was broken abruptly off by the crack of a rifle ringing suddenly and sharply through the woods.

The young hunters gazed inquiringly from one to the other. It brought up recollections of the morning when they stood on that very spot and heard the report of Death-Notch's rifle and the wail of his victim echo through the woods.

"Ah, there is some one besides ourselves in these woods," said Amos Meredith; "I hope Death-Notch has not turned out again."

"It must be some hunter," said Dick Carter.

He had scarcely uttered the words when there suddenly broke upon their ears the voice of some one singing, in a lively air, the words:

"The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,
At the ole hedgehog, the ole hedgehog;
The 'possum he grinned at the ole hedgehog,
Way down by the Squantum—"

"Old Shadow, as I live!" burst in joyous accents from Fred Travis' lips, as the old hunter emerged from the woods before them.

"Bless my ole eyes!" the hunter exclaimed, regarding our friends with surprise; "who'd a-thought it? Here I find ye, lads, after three years' separashun."

"Yes, yes; here we are, Shadow! Give us your hand, old friend, and tell us where you've been and how time uses you."

"Oh, I've been rompin' around over this little patch o' yarth, doin' a leetle huntin', scalpin', and sich like. But, lads, time's beginnin' to plow up my face like fury, and I can't knock a Ingin double as easy as I used to; still I ain't worn out yet. But I got to thinkin' over ole times and concluded to run down to Stony Cliff. Thar they told me the eight Avengers had started a new settlement called Fairview; so I thought I'd run over and see you."

"Glad, very glad, to see you, Shadow. You must go to the settlement with us. The women-folks will be very happy to see you, too," said Travis.

"Wal, I'll go down and see how yer gitting along; but whar's the lad ye call Death-Notch?"

"We left him at Fairview to look after things while we were absent. But let us be off."

The party hastened to where their horses were bridled and packed all ready for starting, and Omaha having resigned his animal to the old hunter, they set off for home.

It was nearly sunset when they hove in sight of a number of neat-looking log cabins nestled down in a little valley that was teeming with industry and enterprise.

"Whew!" ejaculated Old Shadow, "what's that?"

"Fairview," replied Fred.

"The deuce! whew, but ye've got a leetle Paradise o' yer own. Jist look at the corn-filds and the herds o' stock! Who'd 'a' dreamt it ten years ago! Ah, me! this tells me that time is hoofin' it on, and life with me is drawing to a close."

"So it is with all of us, old friend, and you may live many long, happy years yet," said Fred.

"Yes, yes, Travis," replied the old hunter; "but I s'pose ye fellers are all married, ain't ye?"

"All but Omaha, Phelix O'Ray and David Hawes. You see that cabin to the right of the group? That is where Amos Meredith lives with his wife. The one next to it is where Ralph St. Leger lives with his wife and baby."

"Baby?" exclaimed the old hunter, and his eyes sparkled with a childlike joy. "God bless the little critters! I allers loved 'em, and it's been menny a long day since I dandled one on my knee. But who lives in this little cottage down before us here, with vine-kivered porch, and—"

"That is my house," replied Fred, "and there comes Vida, my wife, to meet us."

"Ther nation! Then ye married that leetle angel? Oh, Travis, what a happy soul ye must be; but what—" he asked, shading his eyes with his open palm from the setting sun, "what is that she has got in her arms?"

Fred smiled and replied:

"It is our baby boy."

"Salvation!" exclaimed the old hunter. "Heaven is a leetle partial with its gifts, but 'God's will be done.'"

The party rode into the settlement and dismounted. Old Shadow was received with the greatest joy, and each vied with the other to make him comfortable and happy.

The old fellow never left Fairview. Its good people prevailed on him to spend the remainder of his days there, and he accepted their kind offer. He was the happiest man in the settlement, too, for by those little ones that he loved so dearly, he was known only as "grandpa."

Omaha ever remained a friend to the whites, and as "Josh, the Friendly," he stands forward in the history of Iowa as one of the truest friends of the white settler.

I have only to add that the name and deeds of Death-Notch are still remembered in the North-west; and there are those who can still point out to you trees that once bore the Death-Notch, the totem of the young Scalp-Hunter.

THE END.

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